

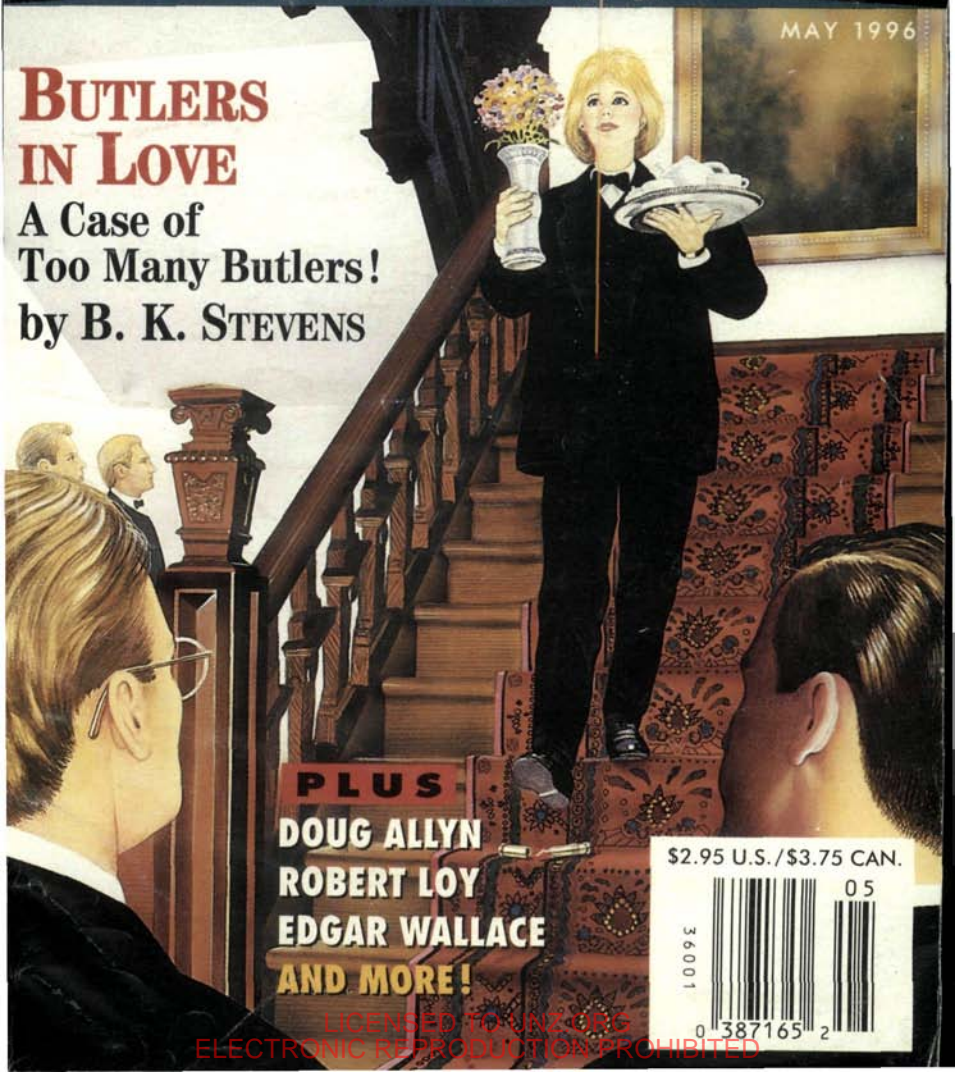
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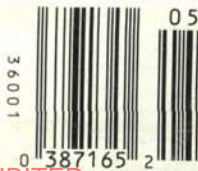
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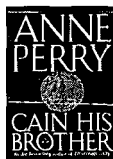
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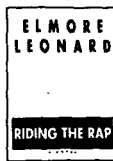
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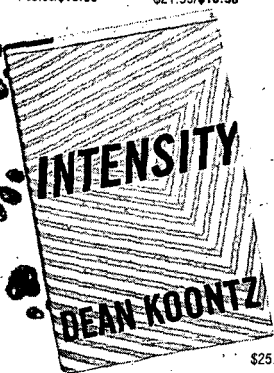
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

AHMM's authors continue to surprise us by the variety of their jobs and interests. Now comes B. A. Silverman, author of "No Time at All," her first published mystery story, who tells us she is a retired professional hypnotist.

A graduate of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, Ms. Silverman started out in theatre in New York, but "theatre didn't exactly crush me to its bosom." After five years she left New York and began writing but also married, became a mother of two, and studied hypnosis. She is the author of the well-received two-volume textbook *Professional Hypnosis Training*.

"When the second child finished college and my husband refused to retire, I figured it was time for my first love—fic-

tion writing. . . . Hobbies? Voracious reading and needlepoint. Most of the time, I'd rather be writing."

In the April 1995 issue of AHMM, we brought you Stuart R. Ball's first published short story, "Copperhead Jack Meets the Gangsters." Because that issue contained a Guest Editorial in this space, we weren't able to introduce Mr. Ball, but now he's back with "Copperhead Jack Meets Bigfoot."

An electronic engineer who now lives in Oklahoma, Mr. Ball is a graduate of the University of Missouri at Columbia. He got into the writing business when he started producing "electronic project construction articles for computer/electronic magazines" in 1982.

In his free time, Mr. Ball travels in Europe and bicycles.

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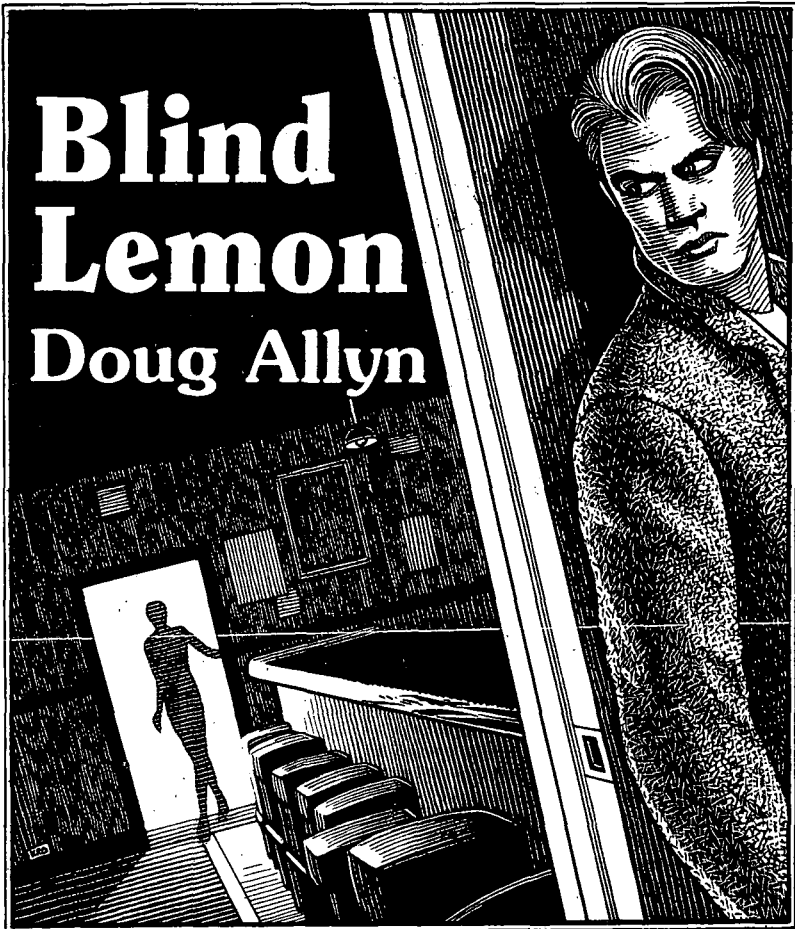
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Blind Lemon

Doug Allyn



“Hey, Axton, we gonna drive all night? I need to use the facilities, you know? I promise I won’t run.”

I glanced at Cootie Keyes. He was a bail jumper, a smalltime

dope dealer, a user, a snitch. Not one of nature’s noblemen. Still, he was worth twenty-five hundred bucks to the Saheen Bail Bond Agency back in Detroit plus the mileage I’d run up on my old Buick driving down to

Knoxville to pick him up. And he hadn't been much trouble. So far.

"We'll take a break at the next place I see," I said. "But only if they've got chicken."

"Very funny," he said gloomily, staring out into the rainy Indiana night. He'd been hiding in a chicken coop when I roused him. Which was appropriate. Cootie looked a bit like a chicken: scrawny neck, a beak nose, no chin to speak of. He even had a few scraps of feathers in his hair.

The neon sign said THE 3-B BARRELHOUSE, BURGERS, BEER 'N' BLUES. I wheeled into the half-filled parking lot.

"C'mon, Ax," Cootie whined. "I was thinkin' maybe someplace nice. It's my last night of freedom, man."

"I'm not 'on an expense account, Cootie," I said. "Of course, if you'd rather wait in the trunk . . ."

"Okay, okay, I'm cool," he said. "How about takin' the cuffs off? It's embarrassing."

"No chance," I said. "Besides, from the looks of this place, half the people in here may be wearing cuffs."

I was wrong. The old log building was surprisingly pleasant inside, massive dark pine tables and chairs, checkered tablecloths, and a magnificent old Wurlitzer jukebox from the fifties pumping out roadhouse

blues from the same era. Home sweet home.

We sat in the shadows at a corner table. Cootie kept his hands out of sight while we ordered cheeseburgers and beer from a surprisingly young and attractive waitress.

Most of the customers were college types, gathered at the far end of the building near a small bandstand. Some of them had Fighting Irish jackets, and it occurred to me that this place was probably only twenty miles or so from Notre Dame.

The burgers were great, flame-broiled, dripping with their own juices and homemade mustard. Cootie and I tore into them like wolves, and I made a mental note to remember the 3-B's. Not that I'm likely to forget it now.

A small combo took the stage, took a moment to tune their instruments, then ripped into their opening number without so much as a "howdy, folks." They were blues dynamite, jamming on a hard-driving Elmore James shuffle, "Dust My Broom." The lead guitarist was a woman and a killer player, passionate and precise. And they weren't even warmed up yet. I was truly sorry I was only passing through . . . and then she started to sing.

I froze, my beer mug poised in midair. I knew that voice. I'd

know it anywhere. Cheryl Vannetti. I glanced sharply at Cootie, but he was busy making carnage of his burger, oblivious to the music. He was young enough that he might not have heard her anyway. Or remember, if he had. But I wasn't likely to forget her. She'd helped kill a friend of mine.

It was back in the eighties. Detroit was still Murder City then. I was a lot younger and hadn't gotten my private eye ticket yet. So I bounced in clubs or collected cash from folks who weren't altogether sure they owed it. And in those days, I still had friends. Danny Liebman was one. A chubby Jewish kid from Grosse Pointe who'd parlayed a master's in economics and a passion for music into a hole-in-the-wall dive a few blocks from the University of Detroit. He called the place Yo Mama's, a thoughtful touch, since the rumor was that he'd conned his mother into putting up most of the money for it.

Mama Liebman's investment was paying off, though. Danny hired a young chick singer with a halfway decent band behind her, Cherry and the Pit. They were drawing a yuppie college trade six nights a week. It wasn't my scene, the crowd was too young even then and the music was white bread, but I'd filled in as a bouncer there a few times

as a favor to Danny, and I'd collected a few bad debts for him from guys who'd forgotten how to add up a bar tab. We couldn't have been more different, Danny and I. He was a Detroiter, born into old Dodge motor money, and I'd drifted up to Motown from a Mississippi dirt farm looking for work a few years before.

We both loved music, though, and we whiled away many an early morning after Yo Mama's closed listening to scratchy old 78's of Big Mama Thornton, Tampa Red, and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Danny was heavy into old-time bluesers and did his best to turn me onto them, too. It might have worked eventually, but my business got in the way and our lives separated for awhile, the way they do when you're young. Or any time, for that matter. Stuff happens.

I hadn't seen him for a few months when he called me out of the blue and said he needed to see me at the club the next day. Emergency.

Business at Yo Mama's was slow that afternoon. Two U. of Detroit sophs were trying to score with a barmaid old enough to mother 'em. Three coeds with cropped hair, no make-up, and Goodwill duds were sharing a back booth and a pitcher of beer, arguing earnestly about things academic. They

looked familiar. Either I'd seen them around or there's a trio like them in every college bar every afternoon.

A deafening delta blues jam was thumping over the house sound system. I didn't recognize the singer. Robert Johnson? Leadbelly? Definitely one of Danny Liebman's precious dead bluesmen. The guy's wailing was unintelligible, but it was a safe bet his life wasn't going very well. No wonder the joint was nearly deserted. I limped across the postage stamp dance floor to the office, rapped once, and went in.

Danny Liebman was lost in the music, slumped in his swivel chair with an old Martin flattop guitar cradled in his ample lap. He was playing along with the tape. Or trying to. Butchering the same lick over and over again. His timing was so lame I couldn't tell if he was improving or not. Danny loved to play. And had zero aptitude for it.

"Yo, Danny," I said. No response. I gimped over to the sound system and turned it down. Danny blinked up at me through his steel-framed granny glasses. He was dressed in his usual street-grunge duds, faded flannel shirt, ripped jeans, shaggy hair. And still looked exactly like a well-fed Jewish kid from Grosse Pointe. Genes will out.

"Are you limping?" Danny asked.

"I got kicked by some yo-yo's girlfriend over at the Bucket of Blood," I said, easing painfully down on the corner of the desk. "Thirty seconds earlier he'd been beatin' hell out of her, but as soon as I step in, she boots me on the ankle. Hurts like a bitch. That's my sad story, what's yours? What's the big emergency? You got a collection problem for me, I hope?"

"Au contraire," Danny said, "somebody's trying to give me money for a change. A guy stopped by to see me last night while I was closing up. Said he was seriously interested in buying the club."

"No kidding," I said, surprised. "I didn't know you were looking to get out. How long have you been open? Six months?"

"Sell hell, this is a dream job. Running a blues bar near the campus, great music, many brews, and friendly coeds who think I'm too cool for school. I'm as happy as the proverbial pig."

"Which you're going to resemble soon if you don't back off on the Bud Lite, bud," I said. "But if you don't have a collection job for me, what am I doing here?"

"I want to tell you about the offer."

"Why? I'm jealous enough of you as it is."

"Maybe you shouldn't be. The guy offered to take over my mortgage, double the points I paid up front, plus ten grand."

"Ten? That's chickenfeed considering the sweat equity you put into remodeling this place. Who made the offer? Some stud from the Afro student union who figures you're an ofay cashing in on black culture?"

"He'd be dead right about that," Danny said mildly. "But this guy's no brother, he's Chinese, Ax. From across the border at Windsor. And he knew the numbers, my mortgage and points. To the nickel. He definitely did some homework."

"So who asked him to? If you don't want to sell, tell him to stick it."

"Actually, I did. Sort of. I said I wasn't interested. At which point he said the price was non-negotiable. And it would drop a thousand a day until I took it."

"A thousand a day?" I said. "Interesting. Did he threaten you?"

"Don't be a schmuck, Ax. I may have had a sheltered upbringing, but I know a threat when I hear one."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Subtle, though. Not much to complain to the law about. So what do you want me to do?"

"Woof him off," Danny said simply. "The guy weighs one forty tops, and you can pass for

a facsimile of lusty American manhood in bad light. I figured you'd scowl a little, maybe threaten him with grievous bodily harm; end of problem. Of course, that was before you came gimping in here like somebody's granny."

"So I'll woof him sittin' down," I said. "Unless you don't think I'm up to it, in which case woof him yourself, Liebman. You weigh more than a hundred and forty. A lot more."

"Get real," a girl said from the doorway. "Danny couldn't intimidate a bat mitzvah class. You're Axton, right?"

I swiveled to face her. She was gaunt, gangly, and looked about sixteen. Her blonde hair was short as a boy's, barely more than peach fuzz. She was pretty enough if you're into the starving gamin type. Personally, I prefer grownups.

"Ax, this is Cheryl Vanetti, of Cherry and the Pit? My house band."

"Right, I've heard the group," I said.

"And?" she prompted.

"And it has . . . real potential. With a little work."

The room chilled about ten degrees. "Gee, thanks so much, Mister Axton, sir. Are you a music critic? Or just a hired goon?"

"I do what I do," I said. "And I'd rather do it somewhere other than this office, Danny. It's too

private in here. When's this guy due?"

"Five minutes ago, and I've got a feeling he'll be prompt."

"Then let's take a table," Cherry said.

"Hold it," I said. "No offense, but I don't remember inviting you."

"I don't need an invitation, at least not from you, jack. I just signed a long-term development contract with Danny, so what affects him affects me. Besides, Danny says I need to learn more about life to be a better singer. What could be more lively than this? Oughtta be a hoot, right, Danny?"

"It might not hurt to have a witness present anyway, Ax," Danny said sheepishly, leading us out to a table near the dance floor. "The guy's just coming to talk; and with you here, there won't be any trouble."

"It's your party," I said, shrugging.

"Good, I like parties," Cherry said, taking a seat at the table. "But you'd better turn that noise down, Danny. We want to woof the guy off, not bore him to death."

"Bore him?" Danny echoed with mock indignation. "You little philistine. That's Blind Lemon Jefferson. 'Bed Spring Blues.' It's a classic."

"Which is a synonym for outdated, passé, and booring,"

Cherry groaned. "If you played some new stuff once in awhile, maybe your daytime business would pick up."

"It's kinda tough to find new Blind Lemon songs, miss," I put in. "He froze to death in a Chicago alley back in 1930."

"No wonder he sounds lame. Jeez, Danny, a guy who's been dead sixty years isn't relevant to . . . Is that your friend?"

Danny didn't bother to answer. A couple was standing just inside the front door, waiting for their eyes to adjust to the murk after the coppery brightness of the Motown afternoon. Orientals. Taller than I expected. The man was six feet or so, slender as a clarinet in a designer leather jacket, all gleaming zippers and studs. Slacks and tassel loafers. She was nearly as tall, but more conservatively dressed; dark suit, a pastel orange Oldham scarf that vaguely matched her shoulder bag. I couldn't guess their ages, tough to do with Asians. Young, though. Thirtyish at the outside.

They spotted Danny and came directly back, moving between the tables with wary grace, like feral cats. And I felt my shoulders tensing, my gut knotting up. It was an intuitive response, not a rational one. The guy didn't look threatening. More like a yuppie stockbroker. Or a lawyer.

Hell, maybe that's what was bugging me.

"Mr. Chen," Danny said, "this is my partner, Mr. Axton."

Chen glanced at me but didn't offer to shake hands. Just as well. Up close he had a slightly rancid air, as though his cologne had passed its expiration date. There was a smudge on his jaw where he'd shaved around an acne patch.

"This lady will translate for me if I need," he said. He slouched into a chair across from Danny. "Wouldn't want no misunderstandings."

The woman lit beside him, hovering near his shoulder like a pilot fish. Orientals are supposedly inscrutable, but this one wasn't hard to read. She was jumpy as a bat in a barn fire. Her brow and upper lip were dewy, and she avoided looking at us, even at Cherry, which was odd. Women usually check each other out for at least a split second. I was picking up seriously bad vibes from these two. Something was definitely wrong. I gave Chen my ugliest thousand-yard stare, and he barely noticed. He seemed more interested in looking over the room, as if he already owned it. And us.

But the thing was, he wasn't exactly a physical type, and I could see by the cut of his jacket that he wasn't packing iron. So what was I missing?

"I told Liebman our offer yesterday," Chen said, addressing me directly, sizing me up. His accent was odd, more British than Chinese. "He said he had a . . . silent partner? Must be pretty silent. The cosigner on the mortgage and incorporation papers is Mavis Liebman, his mother. So you got no legal . . . standing in this thing. Is that not so?"

"My standing is really none of your business," I said. "And it doesn't matter anyway. Mr. Liebman isn't interested in selling. And for a ten grand walk-away? That was a joke, right?"

"No, not a joke," Chen said with a faint smile. "I promise you it is a . . . serious offer. Deadly serious. You understand? We'll take over the bank debts and give you a good profit. Nine thousand."

"Nine? You said ten," Danny protested.

"Yesterday's price," Chen noted. "Tomorrow it will be eight. Maybe less. It's a good offer. You should take it." Chen's eyes met mine and held. There was a flat challenge in them. "But the price isn't the only number here. There's one more number you should know."

"What number?" I asked. "What are you talking about?"

Chen made a production of it. He took out an engraved silver lighter and a matching case

that held cigarette papers. Took out a single sheet, jotted a figure on it, and held it up: 23K. He flicked the lighter and touched the flame to the corner of the paper. It flared instantly and vanished into the air. Flash paper. Very theatrical. Very effective. It impressed the hell out of me, and not because I thought it was magic.

Twenty-three K was a Chinese triad, one of the gangs that had been carving up Windsor and Toronto like so many won tons. Gambling, drugs, extortion. Murder. Serious gangsters. International. And now they were moving into Detroit. Or at least one smug weasel was. And then it hit me. That was what was wrong with his attitude. He was way too cool. About me, about this whole situation. He didn't care whether Danny took his offer or not. Because his gang was just beginning its move on Motown, and at this point a few dead bodies to serve as examples would be as valuable to them as Danny's club.

And the woman with him? Translator my foot. She hadn't said a word and didn't even seem to be listening. She wasn't there to talk, she was a mule. Chen wouldn't risk packing his own gun, that was her job. It was probably in her purse, which was below the table now, beside Chen's knee. And that's why she

was so edgy. She knew what was going down here. There wouldn't be any more offers. If Danny said no, Chen meant to settle things today.

He was coolly scanning the room again, probably counting the witnesses. Danny was saying something about thinking things over, but Chen wasn't listening any more. His eyes had gone empty. In his mind Danny was probably already dead. He shifted his position slightly, with his left hand beneath the table. My God! He was getting ready to take us out, right here and now. And I was unarmed and didn't have a prayer of getting to him before he could fire, unless . . .

His accent. I wondered how long he'd been off the boat. And how sharp he really was.

"You must be new to this country, Mr. Chen," I said.

He hesitated. "I'm here long enough."

"For Toronto or Windsor, maybe. This is Detroit. Things are different here. We're only a small business, but we have a friend. Every business on this street has a friend. A big friend."

I had his attention now. This was something he could understand. "So what?" he said. "I got friends. Probably more than you."

"Then you can see our problem," I said. "The truth is, Dan-

ny couldn't sell to you if he wanted to. Nor could I. It wouldn't mean anything. And our friend wouldn't like it. We could get hurt. So could you. So you're wasting your time talking to us. If you're serious about doing business, you need to speak to our friend."

Chen's eyes zeroed in on mine. "Really? And what's his name, this friend?"

"I can't mention his name to strangers, you understand. But a man with your . . . resources should have no trouble getting it."

"Maybe he isn't nobody, this friend. Maybe he don't exist."

"He exists," Cherry put in, the first time she'd spoken. "He's a Cuban. He has one eye."

Chen glanced at her. Through her, really. As a woman, she counted as less than nothing to him. "What's the matter? He's so bad, this friend, you're afraid of his name? Say it. If it's real."

"Delagarza," Cherry said. "Eladio Delagarza."

Chen glanced back to me. "Is what she says true?"

"That's right," I said, swallowing. "Delagarza."

Chen eyed me for what seemed like a very long time, then shrugged, mildly annoyed. He'd probably been looking forward to waxing us. "Name like that, he'll be easy to find," Chen said, rising abruptly. The wom-

an rose with him. Her hands were trembling. With fear or relief? I couldn't be sure.

"You better understand something," Chen said quietly. "Whether I find your friend or not, my offer won't change. I'll be back in a few days. Price then will be five thousand. You better take it. These are hard times. Will get harder. For you." He turned and sauntered out of the room without a backward glance. The woman trailed him like a shadow, zipping her purse closed.

Danny shifted in his chair and stared at me. His face was slick with perspiration. "Have both of you gone absolutely psycho?" he said at last. "What the hell was that about?"

"Your pal here was trying to run a bluff," Cherry snapped. "Only he couldn't think of a name, so I tossed one in."

"Some name," I said.

"Who is this—Delagarza, anyway?" Danny asked.

"A crime boss," Cherry said. "A big one. Or so I read in the papers."

"That's crazy," Danny said. "I don't know him."

"No, but Chen doesn't either," I said. "And while he's asking around, we'll have time to figure what to do next."

"There won't be any next," Cherry said flatly. "Delagarza's in some kind of federal trouble.

So if Chen asks, Delagarza will just blow him off. Chen'll do some checking, find out Delagarza's nobody to mess with, and back off. End of problem."

"It won't be that simple," I said.

"Maybe you just hope it won't so you can collect another fee," Cherry said. "I thought you were supposed to scare this guy off, Axton, not run some kind of a scam on him."

"Lady, you don't have any idea what was going on. Danny, this guy didn't come here to do a deal, he isn't bright enough. I make him as a stone shooter who'd rather whack you out than buy your place. You'd better go to the police about this. Or seriously think about giving him what he wants."

"Give him what he wants?" Cherry said, aghast. "Are you nuts? Some guy sits at a table with you, runs his mouth, and you wanna pack it in? Jesus, Danny, where did you—"

"Okay, okay, cool it you two," Danny interrupted. "All's well that ends well, right?"

"That's just it, Danny," I said. "This isn't over. He'll be back."

"In which case I'll give a yell and you can muscle him off again," Danny said. "Or maybe Cherry's right and he's history. Either way, the problem's settled for now, and I could use a

beer. Why don't you both join me?"

"No, thanks," Cherry said, rising. "I've got a rehearsal, and I'd better not be late if I want to live up to the promise Axton thinks I've got, though I doubt he knows any more about music than he does about muscle. I'll see you tonight, Danny. And just for the record, whatever you're paying your goon friend here, it's way too much." She turned and stalked off.

"How much am I paying you, Ax?" Danny asked as I got painfully to my feet. "Things happened so quickly we didn't discuss the details."

"No charge," I said grimly. "If Chen's gone for good, then it was as much Cherry's doing as mine. I was just trying to come out of this alive."

"That's a bit of an exaggeration, isn't it?" Danny said.

"I don't think it is. Look, you know me, Danny. You know I don't spook easily, and I'm telling you this guy is serious trouble. What are you gonna do?"

"I . . . don't know," Danny said hesitantly. "I need to think."

"I doubt he'll give you much time."

"I expect I've got at least a few days, and if Cherry's right, maybe a lot more than that. I can't just hand over my place to some thug, Ax."

"Then you'd better talk to the police. And soon. And no matter what, if Chen contacts you again, don't meet him alone, okay? You get hold of me."

"Okay," Danny said simply. "Whatever you say. But I wish you'd try to get along with Cheryl. She's young, but she's got a good head on her shoulders, and she's got a world of talent."

"I'll just bet she has," I said.

"No, man, it's not like that at all," Danny said, smiling. "Even if she was my type, I wouldn't be hers, and neither would you. She's gay, man. Got a steady girlfriend mean enough to whip Godzilla. But I'm dead serious about her talent. Maybe it isn't shining through yet, but it will. She's gonna be a keeper someday. You mark my words. So cut her some slack, okay? I like my friends to get along."

"Well, I'll admit she could be right on one small point," I said. "Your daytime trade might improve if you lightened up on the music. Maybe bag Blind Lemon and play something newer."

"I'd rather listen to the real thing, thanks."

"It's your place," I grumbled. "At least for now."

My ankle turned out to be severely sprained. I stopped at a doc-in-the-box infirmary on Jefferson, and a

medic taped me into a plastic walking cast, which meant I was temporarily unemployable as a bouncer, bill collector, or anything else I knew how to do. Terrific.

I decided to call it a day, pick up some barbecued ribs on my way home, and fort up for the evening.

Papa Henry's Hickory Hut serves the best barbecued ribs in the city of Detroit. Bar none. The rotisserie in the storefront window revolves slowly, cradling racks of ribs and chicken flame-kissed by the fire below. The aroma alone could turn Gandhi into a carnivore.

I was in a back booth finishing off an order of spiced slaw when I caught a name on the TV newscast from the set above the counter. I turned slowly to face the screen. The volume on the set was low. I couldn't catch it all.

"Alleged mob figure Eladio Delagarza . . . luxurious East-pointe home . . . explosion." The flames blazing on the screen were nearly as bright as the barbecue pit, greedily licking the skeleton of what had once been a mansion. "Victims' names are being withheld pending notification of next of kin . . ."

Coincidence. That's all it was. Just a freaking coincidence. Delagarza was in trouble with the

law, maybe one of his rivals . . . Besides, I was lame and my rack of short ribs wouldn't be ready for another ten minutes. Best barbecue in the city of Detroit.

Damn.

I dropped a twenty on the table and gimped out to my rusty Buick.

I parked on McNichols, around the corner from the club. Dusk in Detroit. The street was deserted. A wino crouched in the entryway of the vacant barber-shop next door. A chill wind nipped at my jacket as I limped cautiously into Yo Mama's Blues.

The place was empty. No surprise. Blind Lemon Jefferson's moaning on the sound system would have driven off any customers who weren't deaf or too drunk to stagger out. Damn Danny anyway. A bar's supposed to be a business, not a freaking history of music seminar.

I stumped quickly across the dance floor to the office. And stopped in the doorway. Danny was slumped in his chair. A slather of crimson was leaking down his cheek. He'd been shot. Once. In the eye. Through the right lens of his glasses.

Triad. I'd read somewhere it was their trademark. A way to tell their killings from the two dozen others in a Motown month.

Stepping into that room was maybe the hardest thing I've ever done. I managed, somehow. I touched Danny's throat, just to be certain. His skin was already cooling.

Sweet Jesus. Nine-one-one. Call 911. I reached for the phone but hesitated, not wanting to smear any fingerprints. The thundering blues tape was so loud I couldn't think . . .

There was a clatter from the other room, and I froze. Then took a deep breath and edged silently to the open door. I peered around the corner of the jamb. The bar still looked empty, but someone was out there, I knew it at the core of my soul. As I'd known about Danny somehow, the moment I saw those flames on the TV screen. I glanced back into the office, desperately scanning the room for some kind of a weapon. Damn it, with my ankle in a cast I couldn't even run for it . . .

"Danny?" Cheryl Vanetti called from the shadows near the bar.

"No, it's me, Axton," I said, stepping out where she could see me. "Danny's . . . had it."

"What do you mean, had it?" she said, stalking angrily toward me. "You're lying."

"No," I said, grabbing her arm, trying to keep her away from the office. She stared into my face for a moment, then

shrugged off my grip and moved to the office doorway. And looked inside.

"Oh." She said it so softly I barely heard. I gave her a moment, then touched her arm. She drew away.

"We have to get out of here," I said.

"But . . . what about the police?"

"We'll call 'em," I said, "from somewhere on the road."

"What are you talking about? Chen—"

"Didn't do this," I said.

"What?"

"He didn't do this," I repeated. "Not personally, anyway. He knows we can tie him to it, so he'll have an alibi that will hold up long enough for his people to take us out. This isn't just a murder, it's first blood in a gang war. They hit Delagarza's house an hour ago, and if they're up for that, they can swat us like flies whenever they want. We've got to get out of here, now."

"But what about my band? I can't just leave."

"You have to, and right now. My car's outside. Let's go."

"But—"

"Dammit, girl, we've both made enough mistakes for one day. If you don't think so, ask Danny. Now move it, or I'll by God leave you here."

She looked up at me, blinking as though I'd slapped her. Then

her eyes cleared, the anguish in them erased by anger. "You bastard," she said. "This is your fault."

"You're half right," I admitted. "Which is the only reason I'm willing to take you along. Are you coming or not?"

"Just a minute." She disappeared into Danny's office and came out carrying his old Martin guitar. I just stared. "It's a good guitar and he loved it," she said defiantly. "It shouldn't go to strangers. Besides, he never could play it worth a damn anyway."

I started to say something, but her eyes stopped me. They were brimming, and the hurt in them was deep. She was only a word away from falling apart. So I turned away and went out to my car. She followed, carefully stowed the guitar in the back seat, and climbed in.

We drove all night, south mostly. And neither of us said a solitary word to the other. Not one.

I dropped her at a truck stop in Tennessee. She said she could make a few calls, find a friend to stay with. Under the circumstances it would be best if I didn't know where she was going. Danny was right, she had a good head on her shoulders.

I drove all the next day, wound up at a cousin's farm in

Mississippi, and called a friend on the Detroit P.D. to fill him in on what happened. He told me Chen was dead already, whacked by Delagarza's people, but the shooting was still going on. It might be wise if I stayed gone for awhile.

So I did. I picked up a few odd jobs repossessing cars for a detective agency in Biloxi, worked a few skip traces, and kept body and soul together. It took most of a year for things to shake out between the triads and the Cubans. I kept in touch with my contacts in Detroit. Eventually they told me things were cool, that nobody in particular was looking for me. So I moved back and picked up the pieces of my life.

That was ten years ago, maybe a little more. And Danny's memory had faded some, like an old photograph. It happens. I'd never seen Cheryl Vanetti again. Until tonight.

She looked different, of course, and it was more than just the years. Her hair was waist length now, and dark, though whether she was coloring it then or now, I couldn't tell. Her face had a few character lines, but they weren't unbecoming.

I glanced at a poster on the wall. The band was called Truth in Packaging. She wasn't billed separately, so I couldn't tell whether she was using her own

name. I could have asked a waitress, I suppose, but that might have alerted Cootie, so I didn't risk it. If she was still hiding, it was none of my business.

Her band was really good. A lot better than promising now. I couldn't tell if she'd spotted me or not. She was wearing sunglasses, so it was impossible to follow her eyes. Or read anything in them.

They ended their set to enthusiastic applause. And I noticed that Cootie was getting restless, which was a bad sign. He was dumb enough to make a run for it, and I didn't feel like chasing him around a redneck roadhouse in freakin' Indiana.

I asked the waitress for our tab, but while she was totting it up, the background noise in the room tapered off.

Cherry had returned to the stage alone, carrying a battered old Martin guitar that I recognized instantly. She tuned it, then glanced around the room, waiting for the audience to quiet, and began to fingerpick a tune, Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Bed Spring Blues."

It's an old song, a classic, but there was nothing derivative in her version of it. She sang it with power and anguish and heart. With soul. She'd always had the voice, the talent, but now what her singing had was passion, and the pain was real.

I didn't know whether the song was meant for me or just part of her show, but I think it was for me. When she played a short solo before the final verse, she built it around a mistake, a broken lick, note for note, the same lame way Danny used to butcher it all those years ago. The timing was off, the tune was wrong, but in her hands it was brilliant, as imperfect as real life.

She sang the last verse, and maybe she and I were the only ones in the room who knew what the loss in that song was really about, but it didn't matter. She was singing the truth and the audience sensed it.

When she finished, there was a stunned moment of silence before the roar of applause began, and it was far more telling than all the hooting and hollering in the world. Even Cootie joined in.

I left without speaking to her. I had Cootie in tow, but it was more than that.

The truth is, I don't know what we can say to each other now. Some hurts never heal. They just scar over. It's best to let them be.

I hadn't liked her much, and her recklessness had helped get a friend of mine killed. But most of the blame was mine. Cherry

had no way of knowing how dangerous Chen was. But I should have.

Still, we were both younger then, and when you're green, the world's a superstore, with everything you want. The catch is, the prices aren't marked. So you make choices, but you don't know what they're going to cost you until later. Or how much your friends and loved ones will pay. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you can make it up to them in some way. Not this time, though.

A few hours later, cruising through Toledo, halfway to the morning with Cootie snoring in the back seat, damned if I didn't hear another Blind Lemon blues tune on a college station out of Lansing. And for a moment it brought Danny back so clearly I could almost sense his presence in the car.

And I had to smile, remembering how crazy we were in those days, about music and life and all of it. And it occurred to me that if Danny had been with me earlier, if he'd come back from Shadowland to hear Cherry sing that one Blind Lemon song . . . if I'd asked him if the price we paid was too high, I know what his answer would have been.

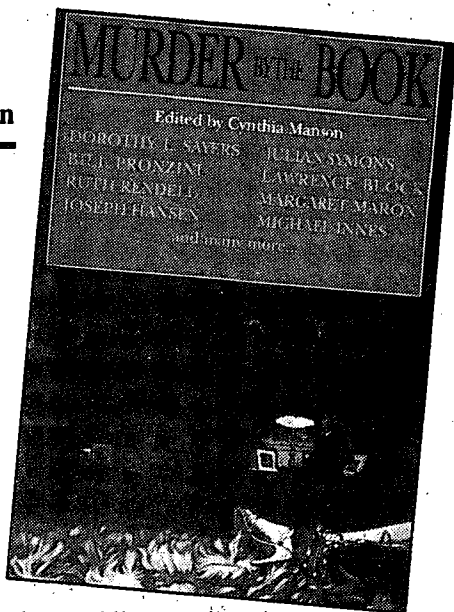
Death Between the Covers

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Edited by Cynthia Manson

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FICTION

My Finger's in the Light Socket and My Head's in the Oven

Chris Rogers

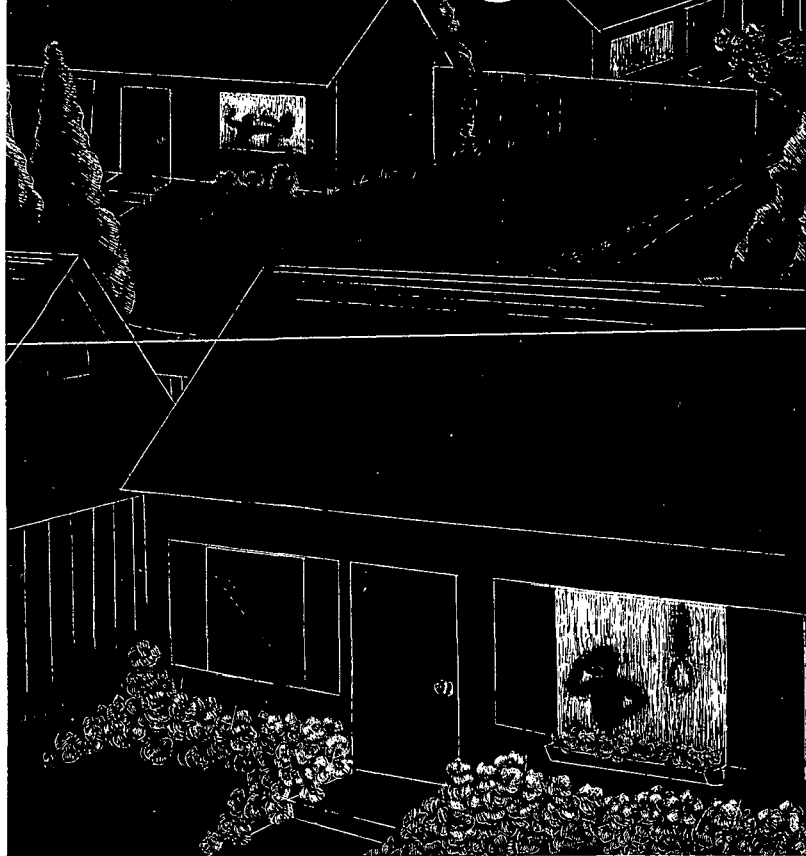


Illustration by Steve Garcia

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 5/96

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Six operators called in sick with the flu, two more got the heaves before they'd sat down good, and the supervisor totaled his new Caprice in a five-car collision on the Southwest Freeway. Otherwise, Full Moon Friday began like any other shift.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"Hello?"

"This is PCO Doliver, how may I help you?"

"I'm going to kill myself."

"Where are you, sir?"

"I'm standing in a tub of water."

"Your address, sir, where are you calling from?" The call had come in through the main switchboard, so the computer screen was blank. Police Communications Officer Agnes Doliver had no information on the caller.

"I have a lamp with no lightbulb," he said.

"Sir, I need your address in order to help you."

"I'm going to put the lamp in the water."

"That's not a good idea, sir. Can you give me your name?"

"Herman. My name's Herman."

"Thank you, Herman. Now, how about your last name?"

"I lost my job."

"What is your address, Herman?"

"Jeannie got mad when I lost my job. She left me."

"I'd like to send someone over to help you, Herman. I need your address."

"The landlord said I can't live here any more."

"Who is your landlord, Herman? Maybe we can talk to him."

"His name is Sonny."

"And his last name?"

"He's not a nice man."

"Maybe Sonny doesn't understand the situation. If you'll give me his last name, we'll talk to him. He may let you stay there awhile longer."

"They took my car. I couldn't make the payment, and they took it."

"Maybe we can do something about that, Herman. Where was the car when they took it?"

"It was right out there in my driveway. They stole it right out of my driveway."

"And where is that, Herman? What is the street address? If you give me the address where your car was taken, maybe we can talk to the people who have it."

"You could do that?"

"We want to help you, Herman, but I need an address."

"Doggone it! This electrical cord's too short. It pulled out of the wall."

"Never mind that, Herman. It could be a sign—"

"I have to hang up now and find an extension cord."

"No, Herman, don't hang—"

Click! Bzzzzz.

Agnes Doliver hoped the call was a prank. She got them sometimes, lonely people, unhappy people, crazy people, people with nothing better to do than take up an officer's time. But every call had to be treated like the real thing until it proved otherwise, and something in the man's voice—

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"He's trying to kill me! You got to get someone out here!"

The woman sounded hysterical. But this was a 911 call, the address scrolling instantly across the computer screen.

"You're calling from 1211 Hennessy, ma'am?"

"Yes! Get somebody out here! He's got a knife!"

"We'll send an officer right away, ma'am. Who's trying to kill you?"

"My husband—he's got my best butcher knife!"

"Is your last name Stuckey, ma'am?"

"Yes, Brenda Stuckey! Lord, would you just get somebody out here? He's beating on the door. Oh-oh-oh-oh—it's breaking—he's coming in—get somebody out here before he kills me—"

Brenda Stuckey was the name printed on Agnes's screen, husband Gregory Stuckey. While they talked, Agnes conveyed the case to dispatch, but she wanted to keep the woman on the line and get as much information as possible. Agnes didn't want the officer going in blind.

"Brenda, is your husband on drugs? Or alcohol?"

"The man's drunk out of his mind—oh Lord! The door's going—"

Click! Bzzzzz.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"This is Herman."

"Herman, I'm glad you called back. I didn't quite get your address last time. Would you give me that address now?"

"I have a rope."

"Would you tell me your last name again, Herman?"

"I tied it into a noose."

"Herman, you've got to help me out here. I need your last name so I can type it on this blank line or my supervisor will be all over my case. Can you help me out, Herman? What's your last name?"

"I looked it up in the encyclopedia, how to tie a noose."

"Herman, what would you like me to do?"

"I hung the noose from the dining room light fixture, where I can look outside when I . . . when I do it."

"What's outside, Herman? What can you see outside your dining room window?"

"Jeannie's flowerbeds. She planted flowers all over. I didn't appreciate her garden the way I should've."

"Does the garden go all the way to the street, Herman? What is that street, by the way?"

"Maybe if I had shown more appreciation for her flowers, Jeannie wouldn't've left me."

"I want to help you out, Herman, but I need some information. What do you say?"

"I'm going to hang myself while I look at Jeannie's garden."

"That's not a good idea, Herman. Tell me your address so I can—"

"I've got the noose around my neck. I'm going to kick the chair now—" **CRASH!**

Click! Bzzzzz.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"Can you help me?"

A child's voice, small and quiet. Kids often called 911, home alone, bored and looking for something exciting to do, not realizing the telephone number and address they called from were immediately tracked.

"I'll try to help you. What's your name?"

"Bobby Lloyd Nolan."

The name on Agnes's screen was Byron Nolan, wife Jesse Lee, so the kid was calling from his own home.

"How can I help you, Bobby?"

"I think he's going to hurt her this time." The boy spoke barely above a whisper.

"Hurt who, Bobby? Who are you afraid will get hurt?"

"Mommy. She doesn't know I'm calling. She's in the bedroom."

"Who's going to hurt your mommy?"

"I . . . umm . . ."

"Bobby, I need to know so I can help. Who are you afraid will hurt your mommy?"

"My daddy. They were fighting."

"Is your daddy there now, Bobby?"

"No. He'll be back."

In the background Agnes heard a door shut, then a woman's voice, nasal, as if she had a cold or had been crying. "Bobby! Who are you talking to? Give me that phone—" Then into the telephone, "Who is this?"

"This is PCO Doliver at the Houston Police Department. Are you in danger, Mrs. Nolan?"

"Ohmigod, Bobby—"

Click! Bzzzzz.

Agnes dialed the Nolans' phone number.

"Hello?" The mother's voice.

"Mrs. Nolan, this is PCO Doliver. Your son seemed worried about you. Would you like me to send an officer out?"

"How did you get this number? Did Bobby give you this number?"

"It's automatic, Mrs. Nolan. Is your husband at home?"

"No, he . . . he went to the store."

"Did your husband hurt you? Or threaten to hurt you? Do you need some help, Mrs. Nolan?"

"N-no. Bobby was just fooling around with the phone. It won't happen again, I'll talk to him, but don't call this number again . . . please."

Click! Bzzzzz.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"Conestra Security. I have an alarm tripped at 211 West Main."

"What is that security number?" Agnes typed the number into the blank provided; the computer confirmed the business location. "And your call-back?" Agnes typed that number as well. "We'll send someone to check on it."

Click! Bzzzzz.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"Hello. This is Herman."

"Herman! Are you all right?"

"The light fixture pulled out of the ceiling."

"Were you injured, Herman? Do you need medical help?"

"Can you believe it? Poor workmanship, that's what. Houses aren't built like they used to be."

"Where is your house, Herman?"

"Pulled right out of the ceiling. . . . Guess I've gained some weight."

"How can I help you, Herman—by the way, what was that last name again?"

"I'm in the bathtub."

"You already tried the lamp, and it won't reach, remember? Herman, why don't you let me send someone to help you?"

"I have a razor."

"Is that a safety razor?"

"The disposable kind. I pried it open and took the blade out."

"Listen, Herman, we may get a lead on the person who took your car. Do you remember your license plate number?"

"I'm going to cut my wrists."

"That's not a good idea, Herman. What can I do to change your mind?"

"Nobody can change my mind, not even Jeannie."

"Jeannie, that's your wife?"

"She left me. She won't talk to me."

"Now, that's where I can help you, Herman. If you'll tell me where she is—"

"She'll be sorry when I'm dead."

"She's sorry right now, Herman. I know she is. Let me call her and have her tell you how sorry she—"

Click! Bzzzzz.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"Please, you've gotta send a policeman. Lawdy, that man's gonna do something awful mean this time. He's so mad, he's crazy. Crazy! Please send a policeman over here to lock him up before he hurts me good. Please, lawdy—"

"Are you at 6523 Oakfield, ma'am?" The name on the screen was Elmer Warren, wife Betsy.

"Yes! Hurry, please—"

"And you're Betsy Warren?"

"Yes, yes, yes, *yes!* Lawdy, just send a policeman. Can't you hear me talking here?"

"Betsy, does your husband have a weapon?"

"No, I mean . . . well, he has these really big fists. If he doesn't have a weapon, does that mean you won't send a policeman? He's going to hurt me—"

"We'll send an officer, Mrs. Warren. I just need a little more information. Is your husband on drugs or alcohol?"

"I-I don't . . . he sometimes takes a little something, you know, to

get a buzz. What's that got to do with anything? I just need a policeman out here before he hurts me good."

Click! Bzzzzz.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"Where's that cop you were supposed to send?"

"If you'll give me your name, sir, I'll check on that."

"Thomas Fledge, 369 Hammerly."

Agnes typed in the name. The earlier call-information filled her screen, the case coded low-priority. It was a hit-and-run on private property, an apartment complex parking lot, with no one in the car when the accident occurred—a waste of an officer's time, since the person who hit the car was long gone. But they had to respond if asked.

"Dented my girlfriend's front fender, glass all over the place—"

"Mr. Fledge, an officer will be dispatched to your location as soon as we have someone free. If you're in a hurry, you might want to drive to your local substation and report the accident."

"Is that what I pay taxes for? So I can do everything myself? You send someone out here right now!"

Click! Bzzzzz.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"H-he's back." A child, crying. Angry voices in the background.

"Is this Bobby Nolan?"

"Yes, ma'am. They're fighting again. Daddy hit Mommy."

"Bobby, does your daddy have a weapon?"

He hesitated. "Daddy has some guns."

"Does he have a gun with him now?"

"I don't think so."

"Bobby, do you know if your daddy's been drinking? Or taking drugs?"

"He had some beer."

In the background, Agnes heard what sounded like a blow, then furniture crashing.

"Okay now, Bobby, do you have someplace safe to go? Your bedroom, maybe?"

"Under the bed?"

"That's good. Stay out of the way, okay? I'll send an officer right now."

"Okay."

Click! Bzzzzz.

Agnes relayed the case to the dispatcher, priority one. She had a bad feeling about this one.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"I passed out."

"Is this Herman?"

"Blood all over the place. I woke up, I wasn't dead."

"That's a good sign, Herman. A sign that you're not supposed to die today. But if you're bleeding, I need to send an ambulance. Where should I send the ambulance, Herman?"

"Guess I turned the razor blade the wrong way."

"The wrong way?"

"Cut my finger. Blood everywhere. All in the water—must've seen the blood and passed out. Woke up and wasn't dead."

"What is your address, Herman? I'll send someone to take care of that cut."

"I tried the oven."

"The oven? Is that what you said, the oven?"

"Put my head in the oven, turned on the gas. You know what happened?"

"Listen, maybe I can get Jeannie to come over and look at that cut. What's Jeannie's phone number, Herman?"

"Nothing happened, that's what. Guess I didn't pay my gas bill."

"That's another sign, Herman. This is not a good day for you to do this. Why don't you give it a rest? Get a good night's sleep, maybe tomorrow will be better."

"It'll work this time. I'm going to use the gun."

"You have a gun?"

"Belongs to my brother. I don't know much about guns."

"Don't mess with the gun, Herman. Something crazy might happen. Let me send someone—"

"What's to know, right? Just point it and pull the trigger."

Click! Bzzzzz.

Oh, Herman. Agnes hoped he proved as inept with a gun as he'd been with everything else he'd tried. With any information at all, she might have—

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"Are you a police officer?"

"This is Police Communications Officer Doliver."

"I want to report my neighbor."

"Are you Evelyn Sanders, ma'am?"

"That's right. I want to report my neighbor bothering my dog."

"Where is your dog, Mrs. Sanders?"

"He's a rottweiler."

"And where is the dog now?"

"Out in the back yard, where he belongs. He's a good dog. He don't wander the streets like some you see."

"Which neighbor is it that's bothering your dog, Mrs. Sanders?"

"The one next door, that Mr. Worthman. There's something powerful wrong with that man."

"Is Mr. Worthman bothering your dog now, Mrs. Sanders?"

"I should say so. Right there in my back yard."

"Mr. Worthman's in your yard now, with the dog?"

"Without a stitch on."

"Mrs. Sanders, you're saying Mr. Worthman is in your yard now without any clothes on?"

"My rottweiler's not a bit happy about it, either."

"We'll send an officer, Mrs. Sanders."

Click! Bzzzzz.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"I-I'm scared—" The voice broke into sobs.

"Bobby? Is this Bobby Nolan?"

"He was hitting her hard, she was screaming—"

Agnes pulled up the case screen.

"Bobby, there's a police officer on his way, he's pulling up in front of your house now. Are you in your bedroom?"

Agnes could hear fighting in the background, loud voices, curses, a door slamming.

"N-no . . . th-the kitch—" Bobby was crying so hard he could barely talk.

"Then get behind something, okay? Or in a closet, anyplace out of the way. The officer is right outside your door. Everything's going to be—"

Gunshots!

Bobby screaming, "Mommy! Mommy!"

Click! Bzzzzz.

Agnes felt a chill seep through her bones, the chill that said this time something bad had gone down. She buzzed the fire department to send an ambulance. Officer requesting backup, her screen said. The dispatcher would handle it from there, but—

Wasn't there something more she could do? Agnes felt connected to the child, if only through a telephone line. Bobby's fear was like a

stone in her heart, a frigid, heat-sucking stone that set her hands to shaking. Surely, there was something—

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"Hello?" An elderly voice, a woman.

"This is PCO Doliver. How may I help you?"

"I believe I heard a gunshot."

"Are you Mrs. Belson?"

"Yes. Alma Belson. I'm alone here, and I think something funny is going on next door. I'm sure that was a gunshot."

The screen said the woman lived on South Braeswood, nowhere near the Nolans.

"We'll send an officer, Mrs. Belson. Did you see anyone?"

"No. But that Mr. Gruber has been acting awfully strange lately. Ever since his wife left."

"Do you know his first name, Mrs. Belson?"

"Herman. Herman and Jeannie Gruber. Nice couple. It's so sad the way people leave each other these days."

"You live at 5220. Do the Grubers live east of you, or west?"

"East, the house with that beautiful yard. You'll see it."

"Thank you, Mrs. Belson. Now, you stay inside. An officer will be there right away." Gotcha, Herman.

Click! Bzzzzz.

Agnes signaled dispatch to send an officer and the fire department to send an ambulance. It worried her that she hadn't heard from Herman after he decided to use the gun.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"He's going to kill me!"

"Are you Cindy Potts, at 3777 Bellfort?"

"Yeah. I need some help to get out of here."

"Who's trying to hurt you, Cindy?"

"My boyfriend. I think he's nuts. He's outside, ramming the door."

"Does your boyfriend live there, Cindy?"

"Yeah . . . but it's my place—from the divorce."

"Does he have a weapon?"

"No, he's . . . he's mad at me. I threw his clothes out on the lawn."

"Has he been drinking? Or taking drugs?"

"He's not into that stuff. Just motorcycles."

"Motorcycles?"

"He was waiting when I came home from . . . from a date. He rammed my car with his motorcycle, then he chased me with it, all the way to the door. Now he's ramming the door with the cycle."

"What is your boyfriend's name?"

Agnes typed the name, along with his age and description.

"We'll send someone out, Miss Potts. Meanwhile, stay away from the door."

Click! Bzzzzz.

Agnes's shift was almost over. It had been a busy one. The full moon always brought out the strangeness in people.

She wondered if little Bobby Nolan was okay. She pulled up the screen. Byron Nolan, found dead at the scene, two bullet wounds to the chest, Jesse Lee Nolan in custody. Bobby Lloyd Nolan, age eight, taken to Family Violence Unit. Grandparents notified.

Agnes shivered. The gunshots rang in her mind, ushering a wave of sadness. She wondered if there was anything she could have done better, anything that might have prevented the death of Bobby's father.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

"This is Herman."

"Herman! You're okay? Where are you?"

"I'm in the hospital. I shot myself in the head."

"In the head?"

"Guess I missed hitting anything important. Got a whale of a headache, though."

"I'm glad you're all right, Herman."

"Jeannie's coming over. The police officer called her."

"Tell her you like the flowers."

"I will. . . . Ms. Doliver?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks."

"You're welcome, Herman. Take care of yourself."

Click! Bzzzzz.

Agnes looked at her watch. Five minutes left of her shift. Time for one more call.

"Houston Police Department, PCO Doliver speaking."

FICTION

No Time At All

B. A. Silverman





I don't know how I get myself into things like this. Strictly speaking, it was my mother who got me into this one. Oh, I'll admit to being a soft-hearted slob who can't say no to a hard luck story. It's gotten me in over my head before. But this one takes the prize, and this time I have someone else to blame for it.

If I had known when she called me from Florida what I know now, I'd have come up with an excuse. Any excuse. I might even have lied and told her sure I'd visit Willie, and conveniently forgotten about it. And then I'd be living the same kind of normal life as everyone else and I wouldn't be the only person in the whole world who remembers the last six months in triplicate.

Sure, I felt sorry for Willie. When Mom told me he'd been condemned to die, I thought she was kidding, only she doesn't do that, especially not about the son of her best friend since grade school. But it was hard to believe. I couldn't think of anyone less likely to turn out to be a murderer than Willie Klein.

I'd scanned some of the headlines back when it happened, but I'd never connected them with anyone I knew. I don't even remember seeing Willie's name. So I went to the library and read all the back issues. Nothing I

read convinced me Willie was guilty.

You'd have to know Willie to understand. He hated violence. He never even watched cartoons with the rest of us kids. They made him sick at his stomach.

But the main reason I didn't believe Willie killed Stella was that he's not smart enough. Well, maybe the word is focused. He's actually kind of an idiot savant when it comes to anything involving electronics, but he doesn't function too well in the real world. When he was a kid, his mother could never send him out for a quart of milk. If he managed to find the store, he was sure to get lost on the way home. His mind is just not with us here on this planet. Even if he could have thought about killing someone, he'd have done something really stupid, like forgetting the weapon. No, this murder was too efficient to be Willie's work. Never mind that he was engaged to Stella.

That was a minor miracle in itself. I never met her, but the newspapers had her picture splashed all over their front pages. Even in black and white, she was drop-dead gorgeous, and what she ever saw in Willie I still don't know. He's tall and skinny and the best imagination in the world couldn't call



him goodlooking. But he was always a—well, a gentle, caring person. Maybe that appealed to her. Pricey madams don't meet "gentle" or "caring" too often, I guess.

It was Stella's notoriety that made the papers give it so much space. She was under indictment last year, but she made some kind of deal with the prosecutor and the next thing you knew, they dropped the charges. That was when her partner, Buddy Gilmore, went missing, so we had an idea what the deal was about.

If you ask me, there wasn't a shred of hard evidence linking Willie to Stella's apartment that night. If it weren't for the neighbor who swore she saw him running down Stella's fire escape, they'd never have gotten a conviction. Of course, I didn't know any of the details when Mom called me.

"Sarah, visit him. Just a few minutes. Tell him his mother loves him and she knows he didn't do it."

Becky Klein was down in Florida, too, but she'd just had a hip replacement so I knew she couldn't come north. I suggested Becky telephone the prison and leave him a message to call her. But Mom said Becky already did and Willie didn't call her back.

I could understand that. You

would, too, if you knew Becky. So I said I'd go.

He didn't look like a condemned man who'd just lost his automatic appeal. I don't know what I expected, but cheerful wasn't it. He recognized me right away, even though I hadn't seen him in ten years. It was strange, watching him through the glass and only being able to talk to him over a phone. I gave him Becky's message, and it was the only time during the whole visit that he didn't grin at me.

"What are you so cheerful about?" I couldn't help asking. It was so—odd.

He just shrugged and grinned some more. Then, of all things, he started asking about me. What was I doing, where did I live, what was my apartment like? I couldn't believe it. But then I thought, well, maybe it takes his mind off things. So I told him.

Not that I was doing that well. I'm a writer, for God's sake, how well could I be doing? He kept trying to cheer me up, telling me to keep at it, I was sure to be famous someday. Right. I never tagged Willie as a politician, but he did a job on me that day. I even ended up describing my one-room efficiency apartment and giving him the address. If I'd had a picture, I'd have given him that, too. Lucky for me I

didn't. He'd have ended up in my lap.

Before I left, he asked me to go to his apartment and pack up everything for him. I asked him if he wanted me to ship it to his mother, but he told me no, just hold it—until after. Of course I did it.

Willie's place was just like Willie. It was a one-room with kitchenette and bath and about as neat as a dorm room during finals. Except for his worktable. It took up a whole wall of the room with barely enough space left over for a bed and a dresser, but it was absolutely pristine. I couldn't figure out what most of the stuff on it was, never mind what it was for, but I packed it as carefully as I could. I stacked the boxes in a corner of my apartment and figured the lawyer would tell me where to send them, after.

Willie's execution was scheduled for five A.M. the following Monday. That's not a time of day I'd ordinarily be awake, even if it was me being executed, but that Monday I actually had a deadline and I was up all night meeting it. I was just putting the label on the mailer and looking forward to falling into bed when I had the peculiar feeling someone was watching me. At five in the morning, with only a desk lamp on and everything absolutely quiet all

around, that is a spooky feeling. I turned around, real slow—and nearly passed out. Willie was sitting on my futon.

For about thirty seconds I seriously entertained a belief in ghosts, but no ghost I ever heard of grins at you, says, "Hi," and then asks for a cup of coffee.

"What are you doing here? How did you get in? You're supposed to be dead!"

"I couldn't let them kill me for something I didn't do," Willie said. "So I jumped. You did a wonderful job describing this place. I didn't have any trouble at all. It's real nice. I like it." I didn't know which question to ask first. What did he mean, he "jumped"? How did he get out of prison? And when were the cops going to descend on me for harboring a fugitive? So I asked them all.

Willie wandered over to my kitchenette, found the coffee-maker, and started making coffee. I wanted to strangle him. I needed answers, damn it, not caffeine! So I followed, meaning to scream at him, and ended up pulling out mugs and milk. I don't think there's a person alive who could scream at Willie. He's too—vulnerable. He stood there leaning against the counter, rubbing his earlobe and looking embarrassed.

"Don't feel bad that I didn't



tell you before, will you? I never told anybody."

"Tell me what?"

"About jumping."

"What about jumping?"

He took a deep breath. "I found out I could when I was fourteen. Mom made a big deal about me going to some dance at school. I didn't want to go, but it was easier than arguing. Anyway, I went, and I really hated it. I was standing there just thinking about how much I wanted to go home—and the next thing I knew, I was standing in my room. It was great. I never got lost after that. I'd just think about where I wanted to be and I'd be there."

I stared at him. "You expect me to believe you're a teleport? Jesus, Willie! I write that kind of stuff. It's fiction. I don't believe it."

Willie looked hurt. No one can look hurt as effectively as Willie.

"I guess I have to show you."

And he disappeared from the kitchenette. I turned around and there he was, on my futon again. This time I was glad for the caffeine. My hands shook when I poured the coffee. It slopped all over the counter.

"Okay, I believe you. That how you got out?"

He nodded and sipped from the mug I handed him.

"So what are you going to do

now? If anybody finds out you're here, I could be in big trouble."

He grinned at me again.

"Don't worry. I'll have everything fixed up fine long before they can find me."

"What are you talking about? Fixed up how?"

"I'm going back and warn Stella before Buddy comes to kill her. That's who did it, you know. I saw it." The only thing that registered just then was that Willie was there, in Stella's place, the night she was killed. "You saw it? The neighbor was right?"

Willie nodded. "I was in the bathroom when Buddy got there. When I came out, Stella was dead and Buddy was going out the window onto the fire escape. I followed him, but he must have gone up, not down."

Which had to be why the neighbor saw Willie going down past her window and didn't see Buddy.

"I just have to save her, Sarah. We're supposed to get married."

This was getting weirder. "Willie, I know it was a shock, but Stella's dead. You have to accept that."

"Oh sure, I know she's dead now. But she wasn't then, when I'm going."

There are times in life when it feels like you just stepped inside a Salvador Dali painting. This

was one of those times. I stopped asking questions.

"Okay, Willie. Why don't you just tell me everything, in your own words." I settled into my only comfortable chair, put my feet up, and tried to breathe slowly and evenly.

"It's simple. You got my stuff, didn't you?"

When I pointed to the cartons in the corner, he jumped up and started rummaging through them.

"Great! You did a terrific job packing it."

He came back carrying a rectangular metal box about the size of a videocassette. It was attached to a belt which he strapped around his waist.

"See, this is the gizmo I was working on. I was ready to test it, but then I got arrested. I call it the Traveler's Aid. We can test it now, okay?"

"Sure, Willie, whatever you want."

"You gotta stand up. Next to me. The field is sorta restricted."

I didn't want to stand up. If I stayed where I was, there was a remote possibility I would fall asleep and wake up later and this would all be a dream and I wouldn't have to deal with it. But Willie can be persistent when he thinks something's important. So I stood up. He grabbed me around the waist

and started fiddling with some buttons on his gizmo.

"See, I can jump in space, but I can't jump in time. I need to be able to see where I'm going in my mind and it's really hard to see a place at a specific time. So I invented this. I can focus it on the time I want to be someplace, and then I can visualize where I want to be then, and it gets me there, then. You understand?"

Willie'd invented a time machine. Of course I understood. I was under heavy sedation in the county nuthouse. And that was too bad because I'd planned on a week at the lake before the summer was over.

"Why don't I just show you. Were you home last New Year's Eve?"

"No. Willie, what has that got to do with anything?"

"Well, I wouldn't want us to bump into you. This place is sort of small."

He fiddled with the buttons again, and all of a sudden my stomach felt like I was going down in an express elevator right after a heavy lunch. Things in the room were popping around—the air conditioner vanished from the window and my winter coat appeared and disappeared from the coat rack with nauseating regularity. Thank God it only lasted a minute or so.



And then everything was back to normal. I thought. Until Willie opened the window. That was when I believed him. You don't usually hear horns and sirens blowing and people yelling, "Happy New Year!" in the middle of August. I shut my eyes on the return trip. It was marginally more comfortable.

"So you see," Willie was saying. "I'll just go back early that day, before I got there, and I'll tell Stella about Buddy and get her out of the apartment."

"Won't Buddy try for her again some other time?"

Willie shook his head. "I'll call in an anonymous tip to the police, and they'll be waiting for him. They were looking for him anyway, you know. Because of what Stella told them about him and her . . . business. They'll have him in jail, and Stella will be safe. It'll be fine. I'll be back before you know it."

"Willie, if you—or Stella—sets foot in this place before ten o'clock tonight, I will kill you both. Do what you want. I'm going to sleep."

It was a measure of my exhaustion that I was able to accept what was happening without going crazy. But when I woke up, about two in the afternoon, I had the strangest sensation. I started remembering things I was sure hadn't happened. Like the day I went to see Willie at the

prison. Before Mom called, I'd been planning to start a new story. Now I remembered staying home that whole day, writing it. I switched on my computer and did a quick scan through the directory. Sure enough. There it was. Half finished.

As soon as I was dressed, I went straight to the library to check out the back issues again. One look and I knew Willie'd run into problems. This time the headlines read TWINS SOUGHT IN MURDER OF MADAM. So I was prepared, I thought, when two Willies appeared in my apartment at ten that night. Except nothing in this world can prepare you for two Willies.

Willie 1 explained it. Willie 2 was too excited at finding out his time machine worked to join in.

"I just lost track of time. She didn't want to believe me, and I kept trying to convince her, and then—" he gestured to Willie 2—"he showed up. I was trying to explain everything to him in the other room when Buddy got there. We chased him, but he got away."

"Do you realize what you've done, Willie? You've created a . . . a paradox. You changed history. And now there are two of you. And the police are still looking for you. For both of you."

"It's okay, we're going to fix it."

They told me their plan. They'd go back to just before

FICTION

CARNIVAL RIDE

Frank Snyder



The first time I saw her she was leaning against the battered railing by the "You Must Be This Tall to Ride" sign, wearing a T-shirt that said "No Fear" and a look like Kathleen Turner in *Body Heat*. A rich girl, you could tell, rich and bored, hanging out at the fair on a steamy August Saturday.

I suppose a smart guy would have taken one look at this girl and run like hell in the other direction. I've heard people say that knowing when to run away is one of the true signs of intelligence. And some of the brightest guys in history knew when to stand pat and when to fold, guys like Napoleon in Russia, or Harrison Ford in *The Fugitive*. Those guys would have taken one look at this girl and scurried for cover like a rabbit at a greyhound track.

Not Jumbo Trotter. I saw him lean out the window of the Rocket Sleds with a grin like I expect General Custer had when somebody told him there was some Indian butt he could kick on the other side of the hill. He called out, "Hey, baby, want to go for a ride?"

She looked up at him. Not quite eighteen, I figured, though that wouldn't mean much to Jumbo. Slim and rounded, dark hair in a sort of Winona Ryder crop, big eyes the color of factory-blue paint on a '66 Mustang.

She looked at him for a long time. "Amazing," she said finally.

Jumbo gave her his big grin, the one some girl in Bridgeport once told him looked like John Travolta's, which it doesn't much. "How about it, baby?" he said.

She pushed the hair back off her forehead and looked directly at him. "Practically Neanderthal," she said.

"What?" said Jumbo.

"Nothing," she said. "Tell me, you catch much with that line?"

"What line?" he said. Jumbo isn't the quickest guy around, and he was starting to get confused.

"Never mind," she said. "Say, that's a really big ride you have there."

He grinned again and flexed his right bicep, the one with the dancing girl who does the hula when he flexes. He's a big guy, built kind of like Arnold Schwarzenegger if Arnold were about a foot taller and had drunk a few more beers. He gunned the engine on the Sleds, making the candy-apple-painted bobsleds zoom faster around the track, and making the little kids squeal with delight. I noticed some of their parents starting to look queasy. "Come on up and I'll show you, baby," he said.

Now there's this thing in sto-

ries they talk about sometimes, I forget what they call it, this point where somebody has to make a decision and you know it's going to turn out really bad. Like when Michael Douglas has to decide whether to go out with what's-her-name in *Fatal Attraction* or the guy in a chain-saw movie decides he's just got to find out what's making that funny sound in the basement. Moment of truth, I think they call it. Or maybe point of no return. It's not important. What I'm trying to say is that maybe it's hindsight but for a moment it was almost like this girl was hanging over old Jumbo like the sword in that story I learned back at Our Lady of Sorrows, the one where it hangs by a thread over this guy's head, although I don't recall now why he didn't move his chair.

But that's beside the point. The thing is, it was a fateful moment. Jumbo was standing there smiling like the guy who managed to book the best cabin on the *Titanic*, and this girl was looking at him like he was some particularly interesting kind of bug she'd found on a nature hike.

While all this was going on, of course, the ride was still spinning and even the kids were starting to get quiet, the ones in front starting to look a little green. The Sleds at full tilt can

make a navy carrier pilot lose his lunch after about five minutes.

"Come on, baby," he said again, making the dancing girl hula some more.

After awhile she shrugged. "How can a girl resist that kind of charm?"

Her name was Amanda. That night after the fair closed she was with us at the Alibi Lounge, a dive near the fairgrounds where the beer is cheap, the hookers are too ugly to be undercover cops, and nobody gets too worked up over a scuffle or two. I was sitting at a table on one side of her, and Jumbo hulked on the other, teetering on one of those little bar chairs. The neon Miller sign flickered and buzzed, and the jukebox was playing that song, you know, the real popular one about a cowboy getting done wrong by his girl.

Amanda was drinking Mexican beer with a lime in it and going on and on about her parents while Jumbo looked at her like a dog at a butcher shop. She sure could talk. Her parents didn't understand her, she said. They were so typical of their generation, only interested in material things. Her father was apparently something big in the after-market auto parts busi-

ness, and his chief goal in life, she said, was exploiting ordinary citizens by selling them replacement auto parts at prices below anybody else's. I personally didn't see much harm in this, but I let it pass.

Her mother was untainted by the auto parts business, but she apparently spent her days playing bridge and sunbathing and once a month serving *ragout aux fines herbes* at the Junior League soup kitchen downtown. Amanda herself was constantly showered with new clothes and stereos and a BMW convertible on her sixteenth birthday, which drove her crazy, and she was constantly being dragged off to places like Monte Carlo and Antigua and Cannes.

It didn't sound all that bad to me, sitting at a battered table in the Alibi Lounge drinking flat Budweiser and looking at the least interesting bunch of professional women this side of Scranton, but when I said something like that to Amanda, she gave me a look that would have frosted a windshield and Jumbo jumped to her defense. It took him a while to make his point—Jumbo isn't much of a talker—but the gist of it was that Amanda was a sensitive flower who was too fine and noble to care for such things. He ended with a ringing and nearly coherent assertion that money isn't every-

thing. Amanda smiled warmly at him and patted his hand like he was a big cocker spaniel. He blushed.

I shut up, but I was worried. Jumbo was plainly smitten, and badly, to talk that way about money. Over the years Jumbo has been involved in more get-rich-quick schemes than Oprah Winfrey has diets. If he had the brain power of the average garden vegetable, he'd be Aristotle Onassis by now only of course he would still be alive. Jumbo, I mean. As it is, he's still got the complete Learn Bartending at Home library, about twenty-seven books on How to Buy Real Estate Without Paying for It, and several cases of dusty Amway cleaning products stashed in my trailer from the time some guy talked him into selling it to the folks in the carnival. Jumbo forgot that most carnies do not spend a lot of time cleaning themselves—or much of anything else—and when they do, they use stuff they swipe from motels.

Amanda stayed with Jumbo that night, which makes you wonder how she was brought up. At the fair the next day, Jumbo spent the day walking around like somebody who'd won the lottery. That night we were at the Alibi Lounge again, and Amanda kept yammering on about her parents. I lost in-

terest after awhile. Even the hookers started looking better.

I think it was the third day after he met her that he decided to throw out all the furniture in his trailer and buy some new stuff, which he did, going to Waldman's Discount Oak Emporium out on the Interstate. When I asked him where he got the money, he admitted he got a big loan from Mr. Simms, who owns the carnival. Simms likes to lend money to the regulars—guys who've been with the show awhile—because it keeps us around.

The furniture thing worried me. Jumbo and I go back a long way together, and I thought he might be moving too fast. The next morning while we were changing lightbulbs on the Sleds—you may not know there are three thousand five hundred and eighteen individual lightbulbs on that ride, which means you lose thirty or forty bulbs every day, more if you use those Indonesian ones Simms has to buy from the brother of that state fair official in New York—I decided to bring the subject up.

As usual I was at the top of the ladder and Jumbo was holding it. "Don't you think you're going a little fast with this Amanda thing?" I said to him.

"You do not understand, Doc," he said. "I am crazy about her."

I made a rude noise. "You've

been crazy about a woman a hundred times since I've known you."

"No, I have not," he said.

"Yes, you have."

"Not like this. This is—different. I think I am in love."

When people start talking like bad movies, you know it's serious. "What about that girl in Allentown?" I said. "The one whose father owned the liquor store?"

"That was different."

"Oh?"

"Amanda is—she is—I don't know. She has got class, Doc. She is sweet. She is good. She thinks about other people. About the world and stuff. You know, poor people. That thing about the earth. The ecology, I mean."

"But what does she see in you?"

He smiled proudly. "She says I am a Natural Man."

"What?"

"She says I am raw and real."

I nodded. "She's got a point there."

"She says most of the guys she knows are shallow and only interested in sex and money."

I hooted. "And you're not? I never met anybody who was more interested in sex and money. Remember that waitress in Hartford? What was her name? Mavis? Melva?"

"That was different."

"Ho."

He tried to look virtuous but only succeeded in looking like he had gas. "Amanda says I have a Soul. Down deep, I mean. She says I live close to the earth, close to reality."

"Maybe you ought to fix the suspension on your trailer."

He shook his head, and the ladder swayed. I grabbed a truss support for balance. "It is not that," he said seriously. "She says it is something in me."

"She's right about that," I said.

I finished the last of the bulbs and climbed down. I was stumped. She was rich and classy, yet she was hanging out in a trailer at a carnival with Jumbo Trotter. Not that Jumbo is exactly ugly; he's a big hit with truckstop waitresses and exotic dancers and female contortionists. And he's a handy guy to have around, too, especially if you happen to need somebody to carry an army across the Alps to sack Rome.

But the thing made no sense, if you know what I mean.

Later that afternoon, Jumbo and I were lounging near the Sleds, in the shade of the German Fun House canopy. The early afternoon crowd was thin, and this alien named Muñoz whom we'd picked up in Durham was running the ride. I decided to bring the subject up again.

"That new furniture you bought is nice," I said.

"Yeah," he said, grinning.

"You had to borrow a lot from Simms."

"Yeah, but there is no problem."

"It'll take you a year to pay it off. More if you don't give up beer."

"No, it won't," he said.

"On what you make? It sure will."

"Nope. It will not be long before I can pay it off like that." He tried to snap his fingers, but he's never been able to do it. I tried to teach him one time, but he lacks coordination or something.

"Oh?" I said. "Is Amanda going to pay for it?"

"No," he said. "Amanda says a real man does not live on a woman's money."

"Huh. So how do you expect to pay off Simms?"

He gave me a look that reminded me of a cow trying to put one over on the farmer.

"Jumbo," I said, "have you got some kind of scheme going on?"

He shuffled his feet in the dirt happily. "Maybe."

I sighed. "You'd better tell me about it."

"I am not supposed to talk about it."

"Really? You always tell me about your schemes. Who told you not to talk about it?"

"Amanda."

"Oh. So she's in it with you?"

"Yeah. Only she said I am not supposed to talk about it to anyone."

"Hmm. She said anyone?"

"Anyone. That is what she said."

"But I bet she didn't say you couldn't talk to me about it. Not specifically, did she?"

He frowned. "No, not exactly."

"She knows we're buddies, doesn't she?"

"Yeah," he said.

"And you always talk to your buddy, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"So she must have meant anyone else, right?"

He thought about that for a minute, then smiled broadly. "That is right," he said. "She must not of meant you."

"Of course not." Sometimes I feel bad about doing things like this to Jumbo, but it was for his own good. "So what's this plan you've got to get rich?"

"It was Amanda's idea," he said. "It is really smart."

"What is it?"

He grinned again. "Kidnaping."

"What?" I sat bolt upright.

"A ransom. We sent a note to her parents asking for a hundred thousand dollars, which Amanda says they will pay to get her back. We are going to split it fifty-fifty."

"Let me get this straight. You sent a ransom note to her parents?"

"Uh-huh." He puffed up his chest. "I wrote it myself."

"You wrote it?"

"Well," he admitted, "Amanda told me what to write."

He pulled a greasy, folded paper out of his back pocket and showed it to me. "This is a copy," he said.

It was handwritten and addressed to Amanda's father.

*Dear Mr. Wilson [it said]—
We have your lovely daughter
Amanda if you ever want to
see her alive again you must
do exactly what we say. No
Police no games. If you get the
police involved we will kill
her she is alive and comfort-
able now as you can see from
her signature on this note.
You must get \$100,000. In
small unmarked bills. We will
call you with instructions on
what to do with it. Do not call
the police or you will never see
her again.*

Underneath was written, *I am
all right Daddy please do what
they say, Amanda.*

I sat clutching the note. "Jumbo, this is your handwriting."

"I told you I wrote it," he said proudly.

"You hand-wrote a kidnaping note?"

"It is not a kidnapping note," he said. "That is the good part. Amanda says it is not kidnapping on account of we have not really taken her anywhere and she is doing it—what's the word?"

"How should I know? Voluntarily?"

He nodded. "That is it."

"Good God, Jumbo! Have you ever heard of extortion?"

He knitted his brows. "Sounds familiar," he said after a bit.

"How about fraud?"

He smiled. "That I heard of."

"Look. What you're doing is a crime. It may not be kidnapping, which I don't know either way, but it's a felony. They call it extortion. Or maybe fraud. I'm not sure. But it's illegal as hell."

He looked puzzled. "But Amanda said it was okay."

"She's wrong, Jumbo. If they find out you're involved in this, they'll send you up the river so fast your butt will be in jail before your head moves."

"But he will not call the police," he said. "We told him not to do it."

I pulled at my hair. "For God's sake, Jumbo, you watch enough TV, you know they always call the police. Then the cops tap the wires, set up stakeouts and stuff. Like we saw on that old Kojak show a couple of weeks ago?"

He nodded slowly, comprehen-

sion coming. "That is right," he said. "I did not think of that."

"Well, think about it. Kidnaping is a federal crime, too. I know it's not really kidnapping," I said quickly, for he was about to start arguing, "but Amanda's father thinks it's kidnapping, and he'll call the FBI."

He looked stunned. "The FBI?"

"Right. When did you send the note?"

He thought. "Day before yesterday."

"So they may already be after you." I stood up and shoved the note in my pocket. "There's only one thing to do. We've got to go get Amanda."

We headed for the trailers, which were parked behind the horse barns, and were just coming around the Wack-N-Smash when I saw two guys heading down the midway, both wearing dark suits and sunglasses. I grabbed Jumbo and pulled him behind the Softy Cone ice cream stand.

"What—" he started to say.

"Shh." I pointed to the two men. "The FBI. They're already here."

He peered around the corner. "How do you know they are FBI?" he whispered.

"Everybody in the FBI wears dark suits and sunglasses."

"Oh," he said.

We held our breath for what

seemed like minutes until the two men passed, walking in the general direction of the carnival office. As soon as they were out of sight, Jumbo and I raced to his trailer, me in the lead. I burst through the front door. Amanda was sitting there reading a book. Something or other about the earth, I recall, by this guy who is the vice-president, I think.

"Amanda!" I said, puffing some from the run.

She put the book down. "Hello, Doc. What's the matter?"

"The matter is that you have not been kidnapped!"

She frowned. "Jumbo," she said, "did you tell Doc about our plan?"

"Uh-huh," he said, looking down at his feet.

"I thought we agreed you weren't going to tell anyone."

"I didn't," he said. "I just told Doc. He's my best friend."

"I don't believe this," I said. "You've got this big dope involved in a kidnapping! And you told him it was okay!"

"I just told him it wasn't kidnapping," she said carefully.

"Did you tell him it was extortion?"

"He didn't ask."

"Oh God." I stood there staring at her.

She smiled pleasantly. "What's the problem, though?" she said. "They're my parents. It

will do them good to part with some of that money. It's the only thing they understand."

"I don't care about your parents. There's only one thing to do. You've got to go home."

"No," she said.

"Now," I said.

"No."

"Yes. If we get you home quick enough, we can get this straightened out."

"I'm not going."

"Yes, you are." I grabbed her arm, pulled her off the chair, and started to drag her toward the door.

Then she screamed.

It wasn't your ordinary garden-variety screech like you hear in the movies. This was something entirely different. It sounded like all the souls in hell getting electrocuted at the same time, if you can imagine that. It was the loudest and most spine-chilling sound I have ever heard, and it was about two feet from my ear.

I recoiled instinctively and took a step back, letting go of her arm. As I did so, my foot hit the lamp cord, and I went over backwards, my hip ricocheting off the pointed corner of the new Royal Oak dinette table, my head banging against the sharp edge of the Formica kitchen counter as I went down. The lamp tottered for a minute, as if

undecided, and then fell on top of me.

I lay there for a minute with the room revolving like a mobile home in a tornado.

"Doc, are you okay?" cried Jumbo.

"No," I said.

Amanda walked over and bent down over me. She picked up the lamp and set it on the table, taking a minute to adjust the shade.

After a moment she looked back at me. "Look, Doc," she said quietly. "Listen very carefully. I am not going home. We are going to get the ransom money."

I tried to contradict her, but I only managed to say something that sounded like oof.

"Pay attention," she went on. "If you make any attempt—any attempt—to interfere with that, I will go to Daddy myself. I will tell him that I was kidnapped by two guys who work for a carnival. I will tell him that their names are Doc and Jumbo, and I will describe them in detail, down to the dancing hula girl on the big one and the ratty little thing that passes for a mustache on the little one. I will tell him that they tied me up and did awful things to me—too awful to describe, particularly the little one—but that I finally escaped."

I looked at her in horror. I

tried to talk, but nothing came out.

She went on. "He will be out of his mind with rage that this happened to his little girl, and in about five minutes he will have every federal, state, and local law enforcement officer in twelve states after your asses. When they find you, which it will take them about ten minutes to do, they will send you so far away you'll never see a beer the rest of your natural life.

"Now," she smiled sweetly. "Did that manage to sink into that thing you use for a brain?"

"You wouldn't do that," I croaked.

"No? Just try me." She stood.

"They won't believe you."

"Oh no?" She pushed her hair off her forehead and laughed lightly.

A chill ran over me. Of course they'd believe her. Miss Teenage America versus two scruffy carnival workers, one of whom looks like Lurch from The Addams Family? Hell, I'd believe her myself. Especially when the prosecutor started reading about things like the drunk-and-disorderly that Jumbo picked up at a bar in Providence and the DWI/resisting-arrest thing they stuck me with in Talahassee.

I looked over at Jumbo, who apparently hadn't understood anything after the part where I

fell down. "Are you okay, Doc?" he said.

"He's fine," said Amanda. "Aren't you, Doc?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good," she said.

"But wait a minute," I said. "There's already FBI men here looking for you."

"What?"

"We saw them on the midway, walking toward the office."

"They had sunglasses," said Jumbo.

"I don't believe it," said Amanda. "He wouldn't call the police. I told him not to."

"He did," I said. "They always do."

She headed for the door. "Come on, Jumbo. Let's go see about this."

I lay on the floor for a few minutes after they were gone. My head was throbbing from where it had hit the counter, and it took me a while to get up and stagger to the little refrigerator. I pulled out a beer and inhaled it. Then I popped another and took a long swig.

That was better. I took a third unopened can, limped over to the chair where Amanda had been sitting—my hip hurt like hell from the table—and flopped down.

I like to think I'm a fairly bright guy, but I was stumped. I believed Amanda implicitly, as anyone would who had seen her

face. There was no question she would tell her father what she said she would, and there was no question that if she did the wheels of justice would roll over Jumbo and me like a Freightliner over a skunk, leaving much the same mess if less odor.

What could I do? If I did nothing, Jumbo might go down for extortion or fraud or whatever. Amanda would get a stern but fatherly lecture from a judge before being released and have her record erased just before she entered Wellesley, while Jumbo would spend the rest of his life trying to remember not to bend over in the shower at the state pen.

If I tried to interfere, Amanda would get her picture on the front page of the newspapers ("KIDNAPPED HEIRESS THWARTS PERVERTED MONSTERS"), and I'd be playing drop-the-soap next to Jumbo.

Not much of a choice.

I brooded about it for awhile, finishing the third beer. If only I could talk to Amanda's father, explain things. If I could get him to listen, I could make him understand. But how? I had no idea who he was or how to get hold of him.

Then I remembered the ransom note. I pulled it out of my pocket. There was the address. Mr. Henry Wilson, 420 Will-o'-the-Wisp Court. I grabbed the

phone and called information. They gave me the number, and I punched it hurriedly.

"Hello?" said a man's voice.

"Mr. Wilson?" I said.

"Yes?"

"I'm calling about your daughter, Amanda. I understand you got a note about her?" I tried to laugh lightly, but it sounded hollow even to me.

"Amanda? Amanda? What have you done with her?" His voice rasped over the line like a pit bull choking on someone's finger.

"Nothing," I said quickly. "I mean, no one's done anything with her."

"By God, I'm warning you, if you've so much as touched one hair of her head—"

"No, no," I said. "We haven't touched her. Nobody's touched her. She's fine. Very fine. Excellent, in fact. That's actually what I was calling you about. You see—"

"Let me speak to her."

"Uh . . ." I said. This wasn't going according to plan. "You can't. Not right now."

"What have you done with her?"

"Nothing, nothing. I swear. She's just, uh, not here right now." I wiped a bead of sweat off my forehead.

"I want to hear her voice! I want to know that she's alive. If you don't put her on the line

right now, I'm going to call the police!"

"Don't do that, Mr. Wilson. She's fine. I mean, I'll put her on in just a minute. But I need to explain something to you—"

"I want to speak to my daughter!"

"In a minute. Let me explain —"

"Daddy!" came a shriek from the doorway. My whole body came about four inches up out of the chair, and I looked up to see Amanda standing in the open door with an expression like a funnel cloud bearing down on a Midwestern town.

"Amanda!" I yelped.

"Amanda!" barked the voice on the phone.

"Oh, Daddy, please help me!" she cried, moving up close to me.

"Uh, this is not what it sounds like," I said into the phone. I tried the light laugh again, with even less success.

"You bastard! You goddamn bastard!"

"Daddy, please do what they want!" Her voice was high and whining now. "Please! Please! They'll kill me, Daddy, if you don't do what they say!"

"Oh my God," I said.

"You bastard! You sonofabitch! If you touch one hair of her head—"

I slammed the phone down. My hands were shaking, and

sweat was pouring off my brow. I looked up at Amanda.

"That was really stupid," she said conversationally.

"You're—evil," I said. It was the only word I could think of.

"Don't be silly. But I'm not going to let you ruin this plan. I warned you before, and this is your last chance. If you try anything like this again, I go straight to Daddy. I hope you now have some idea how he'll react?"

I had a very good idea. I nodded.

"Good," she said. "So now we're all playing off the same page. Right?"

"Right," I said.

"By the way," she said. "Those weren't FBI agents."

"No?"

"They were paper supply salesmen."

"Oh," I said.

"Cousins of the fair inspector, or something."

Jumbo stuck his head through the door. "Hi, Doc," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"Lousy," I said.

Amanda called her father back and, pretending she was being held at gunpoint and in fear for her life, calmed him down. The girl was good, there was no doubt about that. It was as good as TV, except that she

kept eyeing me all the while the way Sister Aloysius did back at Our Lady, which did not make my head feel better. I didn't say a word. Jumbo stood by, nodding.

"He hasn't called the police," said Amanda when she finally put the phone down.

"How do you know?" I said.

"He told me so."

"Oh. And you believe him?"

"Of course. He wouldn't do anything to put me in danger."

"That shows you he's an idiot," I said. "He should have killed you himself in your cradle."

She laughed at that, a silvery tinkle that sounded strange coming from someone who could have given Lizzie Borden pointers.

"Come on, Doc, lighten up," she said. She went to the little refrigerator and brought out three beers. She tossed one to Jumbo and handed one to me. "I couldn't let you go messing up my plan. But honestly, it's not that bad, is it?"

"No? Maybe not. You'll probably enjoy prison. There'll be a lot of your kind of people there. You can compare plans and techniques."

She gave another one of those silvery laughs. "Oh, they wouldn't send me to prison. Daddy wouldn't let them."

I noticed she said "me," not "us." Having spoken to Daddy, I

didn't think he was the sort to go to bat for Jumbo and me on general principles of disinterested Justice.

I took a slow draft of beer. "Well, you win. I'm out of it. You two can go do whatever you want."

She looked at me in surprise. "Oh, you're not out of it, Doc."

A cold lump settled in my stomach. "I'm not?"

"Oh no. I've been thinking. I'm glad you're involved. We can use you for the ransom pickup."

"Oh my God," I said.

"Good, Doc," said Jumbo. "It will be real good to have you. You can have a cut of my share."

"Thanks," I said.

I don't suppose you've ever had to figure this out from personal experience, but take it from me, the hardest part of any kidnapping—even a fake kidnapping—is the part where the kidnappers have to get the money and get away. You watch the movies and you see that nine times out of ten the way they do the switch is just dumb, the sort of thing real cops would figure out in about the time it takes to eat a doughnut.

So when I heard Amanda's plan I had real doubts. It wasn't as bad as it could have been—I mean, none of this lockers-at-the-bus-station stuff—but it was

bad enough. It wasn't original, of course. She got it from some movie about a guy who puts bombs on buses, Dennis Hopper, I think, or Tommy Lee Jones, I forget which. It was too obvious to fool any FBI guy for more than about two seconds, and anyway, they probably saw the same movie.

"But Daddy didn't," she said. "He doesn't go to movies. And I told you there won't be any FBI."

"It's a dumb plan," I said.

"Do you have a better one?"

I didn't, not having her finely trained and highly developed criminal mind. I told her so.

"So shut up and let's get on with it," she said.

The key to her plan was that the carnival midway at the fairgrounds is a permanent installation, a paved area they use every year. The rides and stuff move around, of course, from fair to fair, but the buildings and streets are there year-round. It's like a regular little city, all fitted out with underground wiring, cables, and plumbing, so it's honeycombed with a network of these little passageways you get into through manholes, just like city sewers. Of course, only the water and power people are supposed to be wandering around down there, but we've gotten

drunk and explored them a time or two.

Amanda had us swipe one of the big metal trashcans, the orange ones that used to hold hazardous waste and now say KEEP OUR STATE FAIR. Jumbo carried it back to the welding shop wagon, where I cut the bottom off with a torch.

Amanda called her father and, voice shaking with terror, told him to have the money—a hundred thousand in small bills—ready at six thirty for a phone call, when we would give him directions. “No, I’m all right, Daddy,” she said bravely. “I love you.” She put down the phone before he could reply. She looked up at me and grinned.

“I’m glad I don’t have any kids,” I said.

“Yes, you’ve done evolution a big favor,” she said.

At six, Jumbo wheeled the bottomless barrel over to the manhole next to Werflick’s Wiener Wagon (“The All American Treat”) and put it in place. At Amanda’s direction I had borrowed three of the carnival walkie-talkies and switched them to a different channel from the normal one we used. Next, Jumbo and I crawled into one of the more hidden manholes, over behind the Amazing Headless Woman (“An Amazingly Real Illusion”). I led him down the passage to the right spot and left

him in place with one of the walkie-talkies.

Okay, so you saw the movie and know the plan, right? Amanda’s father would be told to bring the money in a small suitcase to the midway and drop it in the trashcan. Jumbo would be underneath. He’d grab the bag and head for another exit so no one would see anyone picking up the bag.

Simple, right?

I remember at the time thinking about this movie I saw once where this Japanese admiral is attacking Pearl Harbor and all his guys are having a great time blowing up stuff and sinking ships and all this admiral can think of is that this is going ultimately to turn out to be a real bad idea. That’s how I felt.

At six thirty on the dot we called Mr. Wilson from a pay phone near the livestock barns. Amanda did her Girl Heroine in Distress impression again, reassuring her father that she was fine so far and telling him where to take the money at precisely seven o’clock.

When we hung up, I called Jumbo on the walkie-talkie to let him know everything was going as planned.

Jumbo’s voice crackled over the little speaker. “Uh, there’s a problem here, Doc.”

“What’s that?”

"Trash. People are putting trash in the trashcan."

I looked at Amanda. "They're dropping garbage on Jumbo," I said.

"Oh," she said. "Well, it's a trashcan. If it's fooling other people, it will fool Daddy."

"Don't worry, Jumbo," I said into the handset. "It's normal."

"But they are dumping it on me. I have been hit with two Cokes. And some popcorn. And there is some stuff in my eyes I think is cotton candy, only I can't see so good."

I looked at Amanda, who had picked up her own walkie-talkie and was listening. "Don't worry, Jumbo," I said. "Just back down the passage until you're out of range."

"Roger, Doc," came back. "I am backing away from the hole."

"Good," I said.

"It is drying on me. The Coke, I mean."

"You can take a shower when we're done. Just wait for the money."

"Roger, Doc," he said.

"You're doing splendidly, Jumbo," said Amanda.

"Aw," he said. I would have sworn he said "gosh," as well.

Amanda and I took up positions where we could keep our eyes on the trashcan. Amanda was over behind the Spin-the-Bottle.

That Wednesday, you should

know, was Wrist Band Night at the fair—the busiest weeknight of the show, where you buy a wrist band and then ride all the rides for free all night long. The midway would be jammed with the sort of people who'd rather stand in line for an hour than actually pay for a ride, which take it from me is quite a lot of people. The rides would be running full bore, and a guy running away with a bag of money had a chance of not being seen.

At a few minutes after seven the walkie-talkie crackled to life. "Doc?" said Amanda, in a burst of static.

"Yeah," I said.

"He's coming down the midway."

"Great."

"He's passing the Tilt-a-Whirl . . . he's looking around now . . . he's by the Headless Woman thing . . ."

"Is anybody following him?" I asked.

"No. I don't see anyone."

"You never do."

"Calm down. He didn't call anyone."

"We hope."

"Never mind. He's almost there. He's in front of the booth with the purple stuffed monkeys. . . . Now he's looking around. . . . You should spot him now."

"I see him," I said. "The tubby guy who looks like a ferret?"

"He does not look like a ferret."

"He sees the sausage wagon," I said. "He's walking over to it."

"Good."

"He's taking the suitcase—oh, hell!"

"What?"

I put my hand to my forehead and rubbed my eyes. "He put it in the wrong can!"

"What?"

"He put it in the can on the other side of the wagon, the one next to the Onion Ring guy."

"Oh, hell!" she said.

Meanwhile Daddy looked around a little and then moved away.

"What do we do now?" I finally said.

"I'm thinking!" came back with a hiss. Then after a minute, "Jumbo!"

"Roger," I heard him say.

"We're changing the plan. Daddy put the suitcase in the wrong can. So now Doc is going to get it."

I jerked sharply. "Not me," I said.

"Yes, you."

"Let Jumbo get it."

"Brilliant. Maybe nobody will notice that hulking form coming up from under a big orange trashcan."

Of course that wouldn't work. "Why don't you get it?" I said.

"Another gem," came back across the handset. "Suppose

Daddy sees me get the suitcase? What will happen then?"

"I don't care. I'm not going to get it."

"Look, Doc," she said. "I tried to be nice. But I can see Daddy from where I'm standing, and if you don't get that money in about one minute I'm going to go screaming into his arms. Got it?"

I got it. I shoved the walkie-talkie into my belt, then sauntered as nonchalantly as I could out to the trashcan, looking left and right for guys wearing suits and sunglasses although I knew they could be undercover, too.

I was sidling toward the can when I saw this punk kid—maybe thirteen or so, in a Bart Simpson T-shirt—who'd been nearby when Daddy put the suitcase in the can. Now I saw him look around, take the top off the can, pull out the suitcase, and show it to this other punk.

I started to run toward them. "Put that down!" I yelled.

"Hey, it's mine," said the kid. "Dude put it in the trashcan, it's finders-keepers."

"Like hell," I said. I grabbed for the case, but the kid was quick. He took off down the fairway, caroming off people like a pinball. I sprinted after him.

"Give me that!" I cried.

"Finders-keepers!" he called back.

I jerked the walkie-talkie out.

"Jumbo! Amanda!" I yelled. "There's a kid getting away with the bag! He's heading toward the Fun House!"

Behind me came the noise of an eruption as Jumbo came up from underneath that trashcan, looking like the Swamp Thing with Coke and popcorn stuck all over him and hot dog wrappers cascading off him. I heard him bellow, "Doc!"

The kid was quick, but he didn't know the midway, which is built in a big loop with only a few places where you can get out. I kept after him, staying between him and the exit, and I was gaining on him. "Jumbo!" I yelled into the handset. "Jumbo!"

"Roger," he said, breathing heavily.

"Jumbo, we've got to cut him off! Go around the back of the Thunderbolt and come up toward the Enterprise. I'll drive him toward you."

"Roger!" he said.

I saw the kid's eyes darting from side to side looking for an exit. He slowed a little, confused, and I nearly had him when my left foot hit the remains of a candy apple and skidded out from underneath me. I went down, twisting my left ankle badly, but I was up again in a flash, although pain shot through me at each step. Still, it slowed me down, and the kid

was opening a lead as he raced around the corner of the Mars Rocket.

And ran smack into Jumbo. It had the general effect of a bug hitting a windshield; the kid went down as Jumbo stood there looking surprised.

The kid lay there stunned, the suitcase on the ground, as I limped up. Several people who had witnessed the collision were looking at us.

"These young delinquents ought to know not to go running through the midway," I said fairly loudly. "It's a good way to get hurt." Several heads nodded. "Just step back, folks, and give him some room." A few of them moved back.

"Let's go," I whispered to Jumbo, grabbing the suitcase and hobbling off as quickly as I dared.

"We got it, Doc," said Jumbo.

"Go get Amanda," I said when we were a few steps away. "I'll meet you at the trailer."

"Okay, Doc," he said, and lumbered off into the crowd.

I tried to look as nonchalant as I could, walking down the midway with a suitcase full of cash. I think I tried to whistle, but my mouth was too dry. Just a few hundred yards, though, and I'd be back among the trailers, where I could get rid of the damned thing.

Suddenly I was face-to-face

with a tubby guy who had a face like a ferret. He looked at me, then down at the suitcase, then up at me again.

It was Daddy. I took an involuntary step back.

"Where's my daughter?" he demanded, his face going purple.

"Uh . . ." I said.

"Where's my daughter?"

"Uh . . ." I said again. Maybe Napoleon or Bruce Willis or one of those guys would have thought of something to say to the purple, ferret-faced father of a kidnapped heiress while standing there with a bag of ill-gotten money in the middle of a crowded midway. Me, I could think of only one thing to do.

I ran.

"Hey!" he bellowed from behind as I scurried off, limping badly. "Come back! Where's my daughter?" I turned to see him in hot pursuit. "Stop that man!" he yelled. "Stop him!"

Now, the good thing about carnival crowds is that nobody pays much attention to anything, so nobody actually stopped me as they saw me hobble by, pursued by Amanda's panting father. But the old guy was gaining on me, due chiefly to the suitcase and the pain in my ankle.

I looked around for a way out. It occurred to me that this time I was the one running away

from the exit. There had to be a way out, though.

Then I saw it. The German Fun House, up ahead on the right. The entrance and exit were both in the front of the ride, but there was a hidden back door that opened out into the rear where the generator wagons were parked. If I could make it there, I could duck out the back, leaving Daddy completely baffled.

I made for the entrance, dodging through the crowd. I was almost there when a big guy in a Boston Celtics jersey carrying a five foot stuffed Barney the Dinosaur lurched into my path. I ran into him, bounced off, and staggered sideways. I nearly had my balance again, but a little kid with a Sno-cone decided to dart between my legs to get a better look at Barney.

I went down heavily, wrenching my right knee and managing to scrape both elbows badly on the pavement as I tried to protect the suitcase.

"Aha!" I heard Daddy yell from behind. I scrabbled up, grabbed the suitcase, and dodged forward just as he got there. Three staggering steps and I was into the Fun House, waving to old Nussbaum who runs it. Behind me I heard Daddy trying to follow, with Nussbaum demanding a ticket. There were sounds of a scuffle, and

then Daddy was inside, panting hard.

I ducked past the Laughing Clown figures and through the Revolving Tunnel, skidded over the Rolling Log Floor—banging my good knee on a railing in the process—lurched across the Slip-n-Slide, and jumped down the Slide of Death.

Behind me Daddy had fallen on the rolling logs, but he was up in a flash, still yelling, "Stop!" The Slip-n-Slide got him, though, sending him careening helplessly into a young couple who were snuggling in the dark and driving them all into the big cushions at the end.

At that moment I ducked left, flung open the hidden black-painted door, and jumped through.

Forgetting, of course, about the low light stanchion over the door, which my forehead hit dead-on, sending a blinding flash through my head and tumbling me down the steps like a broken Slinky.

I lay there helpless for some time, but I guess the trick worked. I heard, dimly, Daddy go rushing out the front door, still howling madly.

Amanda and Jumbo were both in the trailer when I finally staggered in. My ankle was swelling badly, both knees

were nearly out of commission, blood was oozing from the pavement burns on my elbows and trickling down into my eye from a gash on my forehead. My head throbbed.

"Here it is," I croaked, tossing the suitcase on the sofa and flopping down in a chair.

Amanda pounced on it and opened it quickly. Inside were neatly bundled packages of twenty-dollar bills.

She smiled slowly and looked up. "It worked."

"Let me see," said Jumbo. He looked over her shoulder and grinned broadly. "That is sure a lot of money," he said happily.

"It sure is," said Amanda. She snapped the suitcase closed.

Suddenly there was a sound outside like a motorcycle driving up. It revved a couple of times, then stopped. I suppose I was too sore to be scared. I just said, "Told you. The cops."

Amanda smiled. I saw her pick up her purse and her sweater and take the suitcase in hand as a sharp knock sounded on the door. Jumbo and I watched her open it.

It wasn't a cop. It was a well-fed high school senior with long hair, an earring, and a tie-dyed shirt that said "Earth: The Only Planet We've Got."

"Hey, Amanda," he said.

"Hey, Ronny," said Amanda.

"Hey," said the youth, looking

inside and wiggling his fingers in greeting.

"Guys, this is Ronny," said Amanda.

"Hello," said Jumbo.

"You got it?" Ronny asked Amanda.

"Right here." She tapped the suitcase.

"Cool."

I looked back and forth at the two of them, trying to get my head to stop splitting long enough to think.

Amanda sighed. "I suppose I have to say goodbye now," she said. Then she smiled sunnily. "I want to thank you both for all your help. I told you it would work. And you really did it for a wonderful cause." She pulled Jumbo's head down to her level and gave him a peck. "And you really are kind of cute, Jumbo," she said.

"What?" said Jumbo.

"What?" I said.

"It was great of you guys to help me get this money. It will make a big difference to the rain forest."

"The what?" I yelped.

"The rain forest."

"I thought we were going to split the money," said Jumbo.

"Oh, Jumbo," she said. "Think about it! Did you know that the world loses an area of rain forest the size of Connecticut every day?"

"No . . ." He shook his head.

"And without that rain forest, the Greenhouse Effect might destroy the whole earth. So really, you can see it's a tremendous cause, can't you?"

"Uh . . ." said Jumbo, clearly stumped.

"That's what I thought," she said briskly. "'Bye now.'" She started out the door with Ronny and the suitcase.

"Wait a minute!" I yelled, trying to get out of the chair. "You can't do this! You told Jumbo you'd split it. You—"

"Easy, Doc," she said. "Remember I can still call Daddy if you'd like me to. No? All right, then, 'bye, guys!" She paused. "And don't worry—it was three Libyan terrorists who took me. I never saw you guys before in my life."

With that she was out the door. The motorcycle fired up and pulled away from the trailer.

Jumbo stood there like he'd been hit with an axe. I sagged in the chair like someone the Seven Dwarves had worked over with picks and shovels. Neither of us said anything for a while. Then I said, "Get us some beers."

Jumbo went to the refrigerator and pulled out four cold ones. He tossed two of them to me and plumped down on the sofa. We each drained the first one in silence.

After a while Jumbo said,
"Doc, tell me something."

"Shoot."

"What is this rain forest thing?"

"It's too complicated. I'll tell you later."

He sat thoughtfully for a minute. "I guess I am glad she is going to save the earth," he said.

"Yeah," I said.

He leaned forward and looked at me. "Doc," he said, "you are getting blood on the new chair."

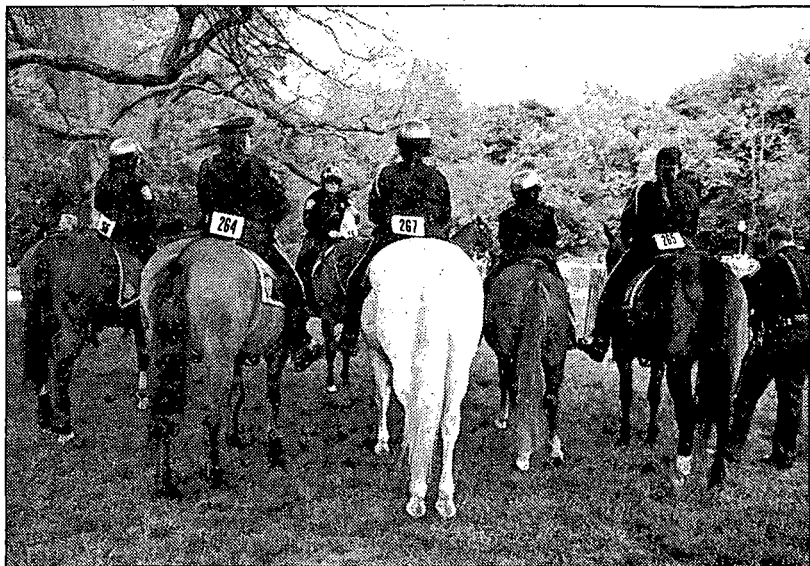
"Oh. Sorry. It's really nice furniture, Jumbo."

"I want to keep it nice."

"Sure thing," I said. We each took another swig.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



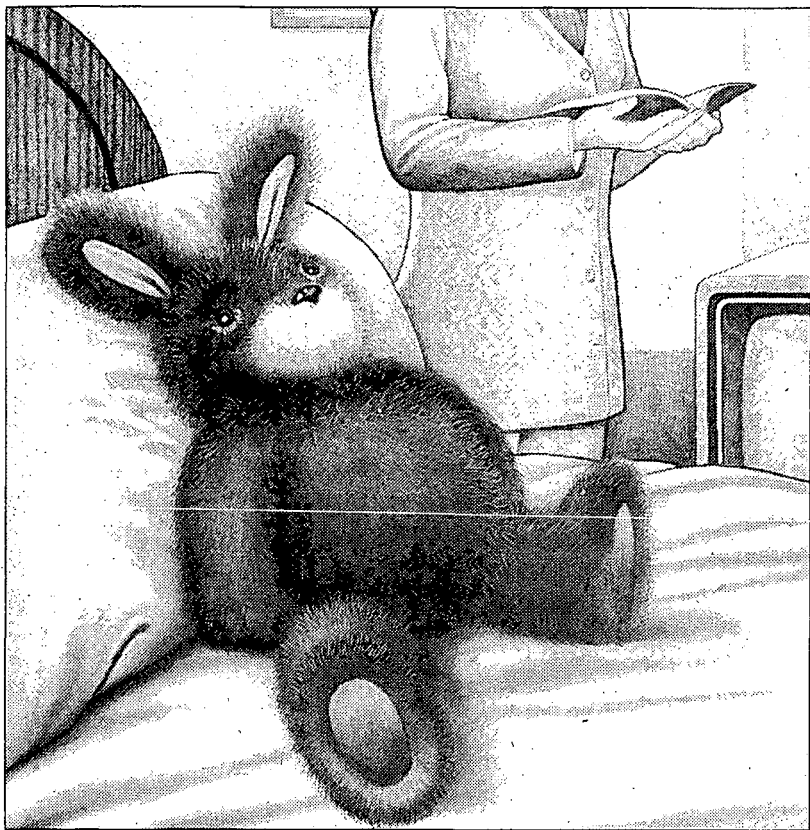
Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Out of order. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "May Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the Mid-December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

Butlers in Love

B. K. Stevens



“It’s discrimination,” Kate Lord said, her eyes blazing with indignation. “To be suspected of a crime simply because one is a member of a certain group! It’s prejudice—blatant prejudice!”

Professor Woodhouse didn’t look up from her knitting. “Butlers never get an even break,” she observed placidly. “Of course, when the police think a murder has been committed, they do tend to be suspicious.”

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And you do have so many butlers."

We were sitting in the large, sunny parlor that serves as the office for Woodhouse Investigations, waiting for Miss Woodhouse to return from court. The Professor was at her usual post in the rocking chair by the big bay window, and I was serving tea. Kate Lord smiled as I refilled her cup. She was a year or so younger than Miss Woodhouse—about fifty—and one look told you she used to be beautiful. Now your first impression was fragility—a small, thin body that trembled whenever a door slammed, softly greying brown curls, wide blue eyes that always seemed ready to fill with alarm, or with tears. Her voice was high, sweet, and tentative. She wore an impeccably cut navy blue wool suit, and her shoes were sensibly low-heeled. She was rich, and she was classy—too rich and too classy to have to put on airs. I'd known that the minute I'd opened the door for her.

Now, at last, someone else was at the door. When we heard the key turn in the lock, the Professor looked up impatiently.

"Well, Iphigenia," she said as her daughter entered the room, "you have disgraced yourself again. You have kept Miss Lord waiting for over half an hour. No, you needn't bother with ex-

cuses—nothing could excuse such inconsiderate behavior."

Miss Woodhouse took off her heavy winter coat and wouldn't let herself sigh. "I'm sorry, Mother. I was sure I'd be home hours ago, but the cross-examination went on forever, and—"

"Iphigenia!" the Professor cut in sharply. "No excuses!"

"None are necessary," Kate Lord said, standing up hastily. "Iphigenia warned me she might be late, and I insisted on coming anyway. Well, Iphigenia! How long has it been?"

As I understood it, it had been over thirty years. They'd been students together at Annapolis's Newton Academy and hadn't seen each other since graduation. Now they shook hands, looking each other over discreetly, obviously trying to decide who had aged more. Miss Woodhouse must have come off well in the comparison. She wasn't as pretty as Kate Lord, but she'd probably never been pretty. She's almost six feet tall, broad-shouldered, lean, her black-grey hair pulled back hard from her face, caught at the nape of her neck in a thick blue rubber band. Her suit and shoes, not nearly as expensive as Kate Lord's, were even more sensible. Altogether she looked fit, vigorous, and confident. Kate Lord, by contrast, looked worn.

"It's good to see you again,

Katie," Miss Woodhouse said as I crept up to take her coat. "I'm sure Mother introduced you to my assistant, Harriet Russo. And you've had some tea?"

"We have all had a great deal of tea," the Professor said crossly. "We might have succumbed to caffeine poisoning had you dawdled longer. Dawdle no more. Miss Lord is in distress and eager to discuss her case. You can exchange alumni notes later."

"It *would* be a relief to tell you about it right away," Kate Lord said apologetically.

"Fine, then," Miss Woodhouse said, and sat down promptly at her desk. I grabbed a notebook and pulled over a chair.

"It's about the Academy," Kate Lord said. "Not Newton—my Academy, the one Father founded. The Annapolis Domestic Arts Academy. Have you heard of it?"

"From time to time," Miss Woodhouse said. "And I read about the death of your housemaid last week, of course. But the Academy generally keeps a low profile, doesn't it?"

"Oh yes. Father saw discretion as a primary necessity for service, so it's important for the Academy itself to be discreet. And we're quite small—we admit only five students a year."

"And the Academy is located in your home? You've run it on

your own since your father's death?"

Kate Lord nodded twice. "It's stipulated in his will that I keep the Academy going; it was the last wish he expressed as he lay dying. Father considered good service central to civilized life and was dismayed to see it languishing. So many families, even quite good ones, don't keep butlers at all any more, and he was afraid that young people would be unable to get training. He devoted his last years to the Academy—adding a dormitory wing to the house, securing instructors, setting the curriculum."

"And then he died," the Professor said, looking up sharply, "and left you to carry on. You were twenty or so as I recall. Weren't you planning to study art in Italy? I saw your paintings at Newton art shows, and thought them almost good. And what became of that innocuous young man to whom you were engaged?"

Kate Lord shrugged. "Oh well. Alan couldn't bring himself around to the idea of spending his life in a house full of butlers. As for painting—well, I probably would have faded to nothing anyway. Most artists who seem promising do. At any rate, I couldn't possibly let Father down. It's been a strain at times, but we get excellent stu-

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dents, we have enthusiastic patrons, and our graduates serve in fine families throughout the nation. It's gone well, really—until this fall.”

“When the housemaid died in such unusual circumstances, you mean,” Miss Woodhouse said.

Kate Lord shook her head. “It isn’t that so much. It was a shock—poor Paula!—but it was an accident. She was cleaning the tub in a small, not terribly well ventilated bathroom, and she made the mistake of mixing ammonia and bleach. She must have become groggy from the fumes and tried to leave, but she fell and hit her head on the sink. And the door was shut, and we didn’t find her for hours because no one else was in the house, and—well. It’s dreadfully unfortunate, but that’s clearly how it happened. I don’t see why the police made such a fuss.”

Miss Woodhouse tapped her chin with a pencil. “Mixing ammonia and bleach—that’s a strangely foolish mistake for an experienced maid to make. The dangers are well known.”

“That’s what the police said,” Kate Lord agreed wearily. “And they said the wound on her head wasn’t right for a fall—something about the angle—and they thought it too coincidental that everyone was out of the house. But we often take field trips—

we were visiting gourmet shops for the marketing seminar. And Paula was experienced, but even experts make mistakes. Why, just this Thanksgiving, Cook forgot to strain the broth for the gravy. It was quite greasy. We were almost ill.”

Miss Woodhouse nodded—just slightly, not really admitting the comparison. “But the police were suspicious anyway?”

“Yes. Luckily, the second-year students are in London, taking advanced courses in haberdashery and working on their accents, and the third-year students are serving their internships. At least they couldn’t be suspected. The police questioned the five first-year students mercilessly, though. Why, they even questioned my own butler, poor old Hopkins, who’s been with our family for nearly forty years. Any butler’s a suspect to the police, I suppose.”

I don’t usually speak up in front of clients—I’m mostly a secretary, though Miss Woodhouse is nice enough to call me her assistant—but I was curious. “What did the cops say about motive? Did they think the maid was involved with a butler?”

Kate Lord looked horrified. “Romantically involved, you mean? Oh no. No, no. Such things never happen in well-regulated households. Of course, in



a house full of young men, one must be careful. And I was very careful when I hired Paula several years ago. She was still in her thirties but already quite unattractive and not at all pleasant. She wasn't the kind to inspire grand passions—sort of shortish and squattish and squarish." She sketched a low rectangle in the air with her hands, then hesitated. "But then, of course, there's Oakland."

"Oakland?" Miss Woodhouse said. "Who is he?"

"Who is she," Kate Lord corrected. "She's a first-year student—our very first woman student, and unfortunately rather beautiful. I was appalled the first time I saw her—it seemed rather like tossing a lit match into a dynamite warehouse. But I don't control admissions. The Patrons' Committee does, and several of the ladies were determined to admit women to the Academy. Oakland passed the admissions tests with high scores, and I can't fault her performance as a student. She'll be a fine butler someday—if we can get past the unpleasantness."

Whatever this unpleasantness was, she evidently considered it more serious than the maid's death. I sat forward to listen.

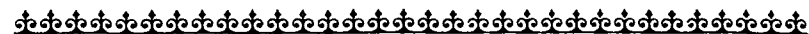
"It began in September," she said. "Some students were upset about having a woman admit-

ted. Nobody actually said anything—at the Academy, we discourage people from actually saying things—but their resentment was clear. First came an anonymous letter to the Patrons' Committee, insisting Oakland cut her hair. We don't allow male students to grow their hair below their ears, the letter said, and it was unfair to make an exception for Oakland. The committee sent her to the barber. She accepted the decision without a murmur—the Academy discourages murmurs—and I hoped that would be the end of the ill feeling. It wasn't. There have been dozens of incidents since."

"Incidents?" Miss Woodhouse asked. "Of what sort?"

"Oh, just pranks at first. Someone replaced the silver polish in her jar with cream cheese so that she failed her teapot test—rub as she might, the tarnish just got murkier. And someone must have shaken up her bottle of champagne before her uncorking midterm; what else could cause such an explosion? And someone put salt in her sugar bowl when she served at the Patrons' Tea, and someone—oh, I can't possibly list all the dreadful tricks. It's driven me near to distraction."

"And Oakland?" Miss Woodhouse asked. "How has she taken it?"



"Very well—never a sign of temper, hardly a sign of dismay. Each time she's simply blinked, apologized, and remedied the situation. Really, she does have the stuff to be a butler. If her tormentors hoped to drive her away, they must be frustrated."

"And who are her tormentors? Other first-year students?"

"They must be, although I couldn't say which ones. The culprits have been very discreet—they evidently have the stuff to be butlers, too, at least in some respects. Then, about a month ago, even more distressing incidents began to occur."

She paled. Unasked, I refilled her teacup. She gestured for more sugar, sipped bravely, and found the strength to go on.

"Someone," she said, her voice shaking with shame, "has been stealing. One day old Hopkins came to me trembling, saying the kitchen cash box was ten dollars short. He thought he'd been careless with his accounts, poor dear. I told him not to give it another thought, though I was surprised—he's never careless." She took a deep breath. "Now I think someone stole that money. Several other things turned up missing, ranging from a bottle of burgundy to a canned ham. And then one morning Hopkins staggered into the breakfast room and said the Denver tray was gone."

"The Denver tray?" Miss Woodhouse asked. It was the only possible response.

Kate Lord rubbed the back of her neck fretfully. "It's a large silver tray, beautifully engraved. It was a gift from the Duke of Denver to my father, when His Grace inspected the Academy many years ago. The duke said the Academy was almost good enough to be English and that he might even recommend our graduates for places in the homes of some of his friends—untitled ones, naturally, but one couldn't hope for more. Father was delirious with pride, and when His Grace gave him the tray—well, it was the happiest day I can remember. And now the tray is gone."

"You suspect a first-year student?" Miss Woodhouse said.

"Of course. We never had such problems before they arrived. I questioned them, and Hopkins searched their rooms but found nothing. That lovely tray has probably been melted down, sold for the value of its metal. I cannot overstate the seriousness of this offense. A servant who steals from his or her employer! What could be more perverse? How can I place these students in jobs or internships and risk introducing a viper into a patron's nest? And the Patrons' Dinner is in three days, and some guests will spend the



night. What if something should be stolen from one of them? Why, it would be the death of the Academy!"

The Professor looked up again. "The death of the Academy. That would be a disaster—or would it? It would be a defeat, but it would also be freedom. How bad would that be?"

Kate Lord sighed. "After all these years, what should I do with freedom? Of course in some ways it would be a relief—but no, I can't possibly let Father down."

"So you want me to find out who the thief is," Miss Woodhouse said, "before the Patrons' Dinner."

"Yes, please. Can you help me, Iphigenia?"

Miss Woodhouse tapped her pencil against her chin again. "I can try. Tell me, Katie. Have you hired a new maid yet?"

"No. I should have, I know—laundry's piling up, and the basement spigots are grungy—but with the police so insistently nasty, and the pranks continuing, I've been too busy."

"Then I suggest you hire Miss Russo," Miss Woodhouse said, and I looked up doubtfully. Me? A housemaid?

Kate Lord looked equally doubtful. "You mean she'd be an—well, an undercover agent. I don't know. I hate to use deceit. And Miss Russo is—if she'll for-

give my saying so—too young and attractive to be suitable for such a position."

I forgave her for saying it. I'm a magnanimous person. And any undercover job—even as a housemaid—is more fun than typing. "I won't flirt with your butlers, Miss Lord," I said. "I promise. And I'm hell on wheels at dusting."

That settled it. Miss Woodhouse and Miss Lord—that's what I'd be calling her now—discussed some details and agreed I'd show up at the Domestic Arts Academy the next morning with fake references from an employment agency and with just two days to set things right before the Patrons' Dinner came around. On her way out Miss Lord paused to admire the Professor's knitting.

"That's such a charming scarf, Professor," she said. "Such an unusual shape. Or is it a scarf? It seems too large."

Professor Woodhouse held it up proudly. "It is," she said, "a map of Paraguay. I am creating a globe. Knitting the oceans will be monotonous, I fear, but one makes sacrifices for one's Art. I mean to present it to the United Nations."

Miss Lord looked at her oddly. It sometimes takes people a while to figure things out about the Professor. "I'm sure the



United Nations will be grateful," she said.

"Perhaps not," the Professor said cheerfully. "My faith in the United Nations' judgment has been tried more than once. Still; one pays tribute to an ideal, whatever the shortcomings of the reality. You understand that. You live in service to an ideal, and not even an ideal of your own. You know what it is to make sacrifices." She looked at her daughter and scowled. "I wish other young people did. Here it is, ten minutes past my hour for cocoa, and there she stands—idle, indolent, indifferent."

With a startled apology, Miss Woodhouse sped to the kitchen. I saw Miss Lord out, then took a few moments to calm down. I adore the Professor—how could I not when she's so sweet to me? But I adore Miss Woodhouse, too, and it drives me crazy the way her mother treats her. The Professor's so smart in most ways—why could she admire the sacrifices Miss Lord made for her father, and not even see the sacrifices her own daughter made for her? Seventeen years ago Miss Woodhouse was a homicide detective, rising fast in the force and engaged to a fellow detective. Then the Professor had her breakdown or whatever—the doctors never quite got it diagnosed—and Miss Wood-

house broke her engagement because the Professor insisted, and resigned from the force to spend more time with her. Why, it was almost exactly parallel to what Miss Lord had done, except Miss Lord gave everything up for a dead parent and Miss Woodhouse gave everything up for a living one. At least Miss Lord's parent wasn't still around to tell her how inadequate her sacrifice was.

"Harriet!" a voice cried from the office. "Sweet child! Go check on Iphigenia. I fear she has expired. What else could explain her unconscionable delay in fetching my cocoa?"

Miss Woodhouse raced by, frantically stirring the steaming mixture in the china cup, her proud eyes moist with shame. Well, maybe I could do with a few days away from this house. Dealing with other people's troubles might be a nice change of pace.

By ten the next morning I was established as a member of the staff at the Domestic Arts Academy. I'd pictured myself wearing a French maid's outfit—short silky black dress and frilly white apron—but I guess you don't really find those outside movies, or Halloween parties. Instead I wore a mud-beige dress reaching well below my

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knees, with a bib-apron bulky enough to drown any hint of gender not sufficiently obscured by the dress. Well, I hadn't taken this assignment for the glamor. One good thing: I'd be staying in the room that had belonged to the dead housemaid, and her personal belongings hadn't been removed yet. I'd look them over tonight. Miss Lord might think Paula Muehler's death was an accident, unrelated to other problems at the Academy, but Miss Woodhouse and I weren't convinced. I had high hopes of finding clues lurking in her closet or bureau.

I finished polishing doorknobs in the third floor bedrooms and took out the neatly handwritten list Mr. Hopkins had given me. Clean the fireplace in the receiving room. That sounded gritty, but it would get me down to the first floor, and that was where the action was. The first-year students were taking some test that involved the front stairway, and cleaning the fireplace should give me a chance to look them over.

Sure enough, they were gathered at the foot of the stairs, all wearing black suits, white shirts, and narrow black ties. I managed occasional glimpses as I scrubbed bricks and polished andirons. First there was Mr. Hopkins, Miss Lord's family butler, who was the instructor

this morning. He was about sixty, and any casting director on earth would sign him up as a butler in a minute—he was grey and thin and stiff, with a face that looked incapable of registering anything but benign agreement and mild disapproval. And by then I had the students sorted out. Oakland was easy, of course. Miss Lord was right—she was beautiful. If her enemies had hoped to make her ugly by making her cut her hair, they'd guessed wrong. The severe haircut only emphasized her delicate features. Nagato was easy, too, since he was the only Asian-American. Crowe was brunet and Swan was blond, so that helped me keep them straight. And Parker-Pierce—well, he was the only one left, and he looked just as stuffy as his name.

"No more practice runs, young persons," Mr. Hopkins was saying. "This will be the actual test. Crowe, you may go first."

"Yes, Mr. Hopkins," Crowe said. He walked sedately but quickly up the stairs, then disappeared from my view.

Mr. Hopkins took out a stopwatch. "You may begin," he said and clicked the watch into action.

A moment later Crowe reappeared carrying a crowded silver tray in his left hand and a



vase of flowers in his right, trying to look straight ahead as he descended but glancing down twice. When he reached the bottom, Mr. Hopkins clicked the watch again.

"Fifty-seven seconds," Mr. Hopkins said. "A trifle slow, and your chin drooped. Try to improve your time as you ascend."

"Yes, Mr. Hopkins," Crowe said. Another click of the stopwatch and he was on his way up the stairs again. Mr. Hopkins peered after him, nodded, and clicked.

"Forty-nine seconds," he said. "C+. Nagato, you are next."

Nagato went through the same routine faster and better, and earned an A-. Sneaking a glimpse at Crowe when the grade was announced, I saw a scowl pass over his face. And I saw something else: When Oakland went up the stairs to get ready to take her turn, Swan distracted Mr. Hopkins by asking some question, and Crowe strolled by the stairs. His hand shot out of his pocket, and now there was a glint of something on the sixth stair. Sabotage! I was doing well—only a few hours on the job, and I'd caught a culprit in the act. But poor Oakland!

There was no time to warn her. The stopwatch clicked again, and she came down the stairs, eyes straight ahead, foot-

steps rapid and sure. Then she reached the sixth stair, and her foot landed squarely on the glinting thing. She tottered, a startled look coming into her eyes. She didn't drop the tray, but a teacup clinked softly against a sugarbowl, and the vase shook in her hand. Parker-Pierce gasped, and Mr. Hopkins frowned.

"Unsatisfactory," he said when she reached the bottom step. "You must not slip, Oakland—what if you had fallen, and broken the mistress's teapot? And see here—you have slopped water on the sixth step. And what is this?" He picked up the glinting thing, and his eyebrows actually quivered. "A lipstick!" he said, horrified. "It must have fallen from your pocket—that is why you slipped. I am displeased. You must not carry about personal possessions when you are engaged in your duties. They can only cause complications as this mishap proves. There is no need to complete the test, Oakland. You have failed."

I expected her to protest—she must have known she hadn't dropped the lipstick, must have known a student had booby-trapped the staircase. But I guess butlers don't make excuses.

She nodded. "Yes, Mr. Hopkins," she said. "I apologize."



I saw Crowe grin at Swan, saw Swan hide a snicker. Nagato saw them, too, and his mouth went rigid with suppressed anger.

That anger came out at lunch. Mr. Hopkins was serving Miss Lord in the dining room, and the students unstiffened noticeably in his absence as they took their places around the long wooden table in the kitchen. Cook waved me off when I offered to help.

"No, you take a seat and have a bite," she said. She was an immense woman, her size accurately reflecting the quality of the meals she produced. "It's your first day—you must be tired."

Crowe patted the chair next to him. "Sit right here, honey. Well! You're an improvement on old Paula. What's your name?"

"Harriet, sir," I said meekly, sitting down.

"Hey, no 'sir' stuff, now," he said, passing me a platter of cold cuts. "That's just for when old Hopkins is around."

Nagato looked at him coolly. "It's Mr. Hopkins, Crowe. We should show him proper respect, even when he isn't present. But you don't have much respect for anything, do you?"

"Let it go, Nagato," Oakland said quietly. She filled her plate with salad and didn't look up.

"Maybe you better eat more than salad," Swan said, leaning

across the table, coming insolently close to her. "Maybe you're undernourished, and that's why you got light-headed and slipped."

Oakland's face tightened. "I did not get light-headed," she said, still quietly, still not looking up. "And that lipstick was in my bureau drawer when I left my room this morning. There's no need to say anything more about the subject."

"Yes, let's do let it drop," Parker-Pierce said anxiously. "We don't want to make a bad first impression on Harriet, after all, by boring her with silly quarrels."

Nagato put down his fork. "This one isn't silly," he said. "If Oakland had fallen, she might have been hurt. I don't know if you were in on it, Parker-Pierce, but I know damn well both Crowe and Swan were. And I think it's time to put an end to this whole business. Oakland won't go to Miss Lord, but maybe I will."

Crowe shrugged. "Fine. So go. I'll go, too. I've got a few choice tidbits of my own to tell her."

"Oh, please!" Parker-Pierce cried, distressed. "You'll just get each other expelled. What good will that do?"

He waved an arm for emphasis, overturning a pitcher. Milk flooded Swan's plate and dripped onto his pants. Swan



jumped up, swearing bitterly, and I ran for a sponge.

"I'm frightfully sorry," Parker-Pierce said, blushing, "but really, Swan, you mustn't swear in front of the ladies."

Crowe grinned, still amused by it all. "He must mean you shouldn't swear in front of Harriet and Cook, Swan. Nobody could object to your swearing in front of a slut like Oakland."

That did it. "Bastard!" Nagato shouted, grabbing his glass of iced tea. He shot its contents across the table at Crowe.

Most of it landed on Swan. "Tea!" he cried, looking in horror at the amber spot on his white shirt. "That stains!" Furiously, he picked up the ketchup bowl and threw it at Nagato, hitting him square in the chest.

Nagato froze, shocked, then reached for the mustard pot. Crowe grabbed his wrist, and Swan snatched up a fork and stabbed Nagato in the arm. I don't think it hurt him—it was just a regular fork, and Nagato was wearing his suit jacket—but it made him mad. Yanking his arm free, he grabbed Swan by the lapels, pulling him forward onto the table. Plates clattered to the floor, Parker-Pierce screamed, and Swan slid across the table, throwing himself on Nagato. Nagato fell over backwards, Swan on top of him, and they grappled on the floor.

Crowe raced around the table to join in. Pushing Swan aside, he picked Nagato up and shoved him against the wall, knocking the wind out of him. Swan scrambled to his feet and charged. In a moment, his left hand was tight on Nagato's throat, pinning him to the wall, and they were both punching him, wild with fury.

I couldn't worry about my cover now. Whether Crowe and Swan realized it or not, Nagato was in trouble, choking, eyes rolling back—he might pass out, or worse. Dropping my sponge, I let out a yell I'd learned at Mr. Lee's Aerobic Kung-Fu Studio and leapt forward. I seized Swan by the wrist, grabbed it tightly with both hands, and twisted back. As he fell, I jabbed him once in the stomach, hard. No more battling for this butler. Not today.

Crowe saw what was going on, released Nagato, and jumped on me. Shifting my weight and twisting around, I bent my knees slightly and put my arm around Crowe, pulling him onto my hip. A quick upwards jerk of my knees and he was in the air. I spun him around and tossed him on top of Swan.

Mr. Hopkins arrived just in time to see Crowe land. I don't think I've ever seen anyone more shocked. He stood paralyzed in the kitchen doorway;

taking it all in—Crowe and Swan writhing on the floor, Parker-Pierce sobbing, Nagato massaging his throat as Cook and Oakland hovered by him, me still in my stance.

Then Mr. Hopkins saw the red stain on Nagato's chest. He pointed with a shaking finger. "Blood?" he asked.

With a heroic effort, Nagato forced air into his lungs. "No, Mr. Hopkins," he said, gasping. "Ketchup."

Mr. Hopkins blinked, trying to comprehend. He turned to me. I was the only one still in fighting form; I guess that made me look guilty. "Harriet!" he said. "You are the aggressor?"

"No, Mr. Hopkins," Cook said, answering for me. "Harriet stopped it. Swan and Crowe were pounding on Nagato here. Like to killing him, they were—the poor thing could hardly breathe, and all that punching! Harriet pulled them off him."

"Nagato started it," Swan said, whining. He pulled himself to his knees and tried to brush the lettuce off his shirt.

"That's not true!" Oakland said hotly. "You stabbed him with a fork! You threw ketchup at him! You—"

Mr. Hopkins held up a hand, silencing everyone. Trembling, he passed a crisply pressed handkerchief across his brow. "Never," he said. "Never in all

my years have I seen anything like this. You, who have the sacred duty of preserving the peace of the household—brawling, distressing your mistress! Oh yes. Miss Lord is distressed. In the dining room we heard the cries—and the crashes. Only with difficulty did I keep her from rushing in here herself and persuaded her to lie on the sofa. She will need an extra session with the acupuncturist today, I fear. Young persons! How can you ever forgive yourselves?"

We all hung our heads. "But I didn't do anything wrong, Mr. Hopkins," Parker-Pierce said plaintively. "At least, I—"

"Silence!" Mr. Hopkins ordered. "I will hear no excuses. Cook, you and Harriet are guiltless in this sad affair?"

"Yes, sir," Cook said. "Guiltless as the dawn."

"Then you two may clean up this disgraceful mess and return to your duties. As for the rest of you—" he took them all in with one withering glance—"go to your rooms and repair your appearances. At two o'clock present yourselves in the small parlor, each with a written account of what happened—best handwriting, straight margins. I will examine your accounts and report to Miss Lord, and she will decide what to do." He started to walk away, then





wheeled about, magnificent with propriety and wrath. "I shouldn't be surprised if she expels every one of you."

I wouldn't have been surprised, either, but she didn't. I managed to be dusting near her sitting room when Mr. Hopkins made his report, and I heard his soothing tones, heard her sobbing in dismay; at one point I heard her cry out, "Oh, Hopkins! It's too much, truly! If only—but no. One mustn't let Papa down." In the end she decided she couldn't know which ones deserved to be expelled, and she couldn't expel them all—it would be too horrible to face the patrons when they arrived for the Holiday Dinner the day after tomorrow, and to try to explain why they didn't have a bevy of butlers serving them as usual. So all five student butlers were put on probation, warned they'd be expelled if there were more disturbances. Mr. Hopkins scurried out of the sitting room, Miss Lord's acupuncturist scurried in, and all was again more or less normal at the Domestic Arts Academy.

So I went quietly about my duties, watching and listening. Several outside instructors arrived, and students passed demurely from class to class. At one point I passed the dining room and saw Nagato carving a squab while a fat, enthusiastic

Frenchman coached him; watering plants upstairs, I saw Swan and Crowe packing valises under the supervision of an angry German sort; later, carrying a laundry basket downstairs, I glanced into a small basement room to see Parker-Pierce strapped to a lie-detector, holding a phone, and sweating while a swarthy instructor with a Brooklyn accent paced behind him.

"No!" the instructor snapped. "The needle's still wiggling. Try again, with real sincerity—"The master is not at home."

I lingered a moment, curious to see if Parker-Pierce would pass the test, and was startled by a finger tapping my shoulder smartly. I turned around to see Oakland frowning at me.

"Harriet," she said, "you have a job to do. You mustn't gape at things that don't concern you. It's not done."

"Yes, miss. I'm sorry, miss," I said, trying for what I hoped was the right blend of timidity and eagerness. "But it's so interesting. I've never been at a place like this before."

"There is no other place like this." She gazed at the lie-detector, her eyes misting with affection. "You are employed by a unique institution, Harriet, dedicated to the preservation of an ancient, honorable profession. We must always be mindful of



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the need to show respect for the place and its traditions."

"Yes, miss. But it's—well, if you'll forgive my saying so, miss, it's not traditional for women to be butlers, you know."

"That," Oakland said firmly, "is merely an accident of history. Women, Harriet, are just as capable as men are of being obsequious and self-effacing, just as capable of doing demeaning tasks. If feminism teaches us anything, it teaches us that."

"Yes, miss," I said, and sped to the laundry room. Minutes later, as I was measuring bleach, Parker-Pierce peered in.

"Congratulate me, Harriet!" he said. "I defeated that silly needle and passed the test at last! I feel quite jubilant."

"And no wonder, sir," I said, smiling. "Congratulations indeed. And Miss Oakland—is she taking the test now?"

"Yes, but it's no real test for her. She'll pass, Harriet—never fear. She always does." He gazed in the direction of the lie-detector room, sighing almost indiscreetly.

"You think highly of her, don't you, sir?" I ventured.

He looked ruffled. "Well, yes. She's the top student in our class. Any fair-minded person would think highly of her." He glanced at me oddly. "Careful with that bleach. That's what did our last maid in—being

careless with bleach and ammonia."

"Yes, sir." I watched him as he strode down the hall. The reference to bleach and ammonia unsettled me. But Parker-Pierce had to be the most harmless of the students—didn't he?

At least more harmless than Crowe. When I took a delivery from a drugstore, carried the small white bag up to Miss Lord's bedroom, and sneaked a peek at the label—it was an antidepressant—someone came up behind me. He goosed. I jumped.

"Really, Mr. Crowe!" I exclaimed. "I don't enjoy that."

"Oh, I bet you do," he said, grabbing me around the waist. "You're very physical, Harriet. I could tell that when you pulled me on your hip. I wasn't angry—I was turned on. I'm still turned on. You got any other tricks you can show me?"

About a hundred, I thought, and pictured myself swinging my arms up, smashing my hands against the sides of his head, and breaking both his eardrums. All in all, though, that probably wouldn't be prudent. So I just wiggled out of his embrace. "Please, Mr. Crowe! You shouldn't be up here at all."

"Invading the inner sanctum, am I?" he said, and chuckled. He lunged, and I dodged. He chuckled again. "Come on, Har-

riety. Don't be a tease. Don't be like that other bitch—"

"Crowe!" a voice said sharply. Mr. Hopkins stood in the doorway, stiff with disapproval. "You mustn't disturb Harriet when she is working. And haven't you flatware to polish?"

"Yes, Mr. Hopkins," Crowe said, and vanished.

Mr. Hopkins smiled faintly at me. "Cook described, in some detail, the way you handled the crisis in the kitchen. How did a young person like yourself come to learn such skills?"

I shrugged. "My parents are very cautious. They wouldn't let me date until I had my black belt."

He nodded in approval. "In these corrupt times, such measures are wise. In this house, we live by a different code. Today you saw that code violated, but I trust you will find such behavior the exception, not the rule. Here, propriety is supreme, faithful service to one's employer the highest good."

"Yes, sir," I said humbly. "That sort of service is very satisfying, when one's employer is a truly superior person."

He shrugged. "Employers are superior in some ways, and it is our place to give them absolute loyalty. Of course one almost thinks that the Almighty in his wisdom gave some people wealth because He knew they

could not survive without the devoted service of others, and that those placed in subservient positions are in fact much hardier, much more capable of—well. I must not detain you, Harriet, with chatter. Cook needs your assistance."

"Yes, sir," I said. As I walked downstairs, I heard a murmur of voices and paused. It was Parker-Pierce's voice, low but insistent. There was a curt reply—Oakland—and then Parker-Pierce again. I strained, trying to make out the words, so intent I didn't hear Swan start down the stairs behind me until it was too late. I jumped guiltily, and he sneered.

"Snooping?" he said, coming to stand beside me. "That's a dangerous habit for maids. The other one was a snoop, too, always sneaking and spying. Mind your own business, or you might end up dead on a bathroom floor—or at the bottom of the stairs."

He smacked his shoulder against mine as he passed, so hard I had to grab the railing to keep my balance. That's a nasty one, I thought, and walked, a little shakily, to the kitchen.

Cook set me to work shelling peas. I was just getting into it when Nagato came in carrying a tray and pitcher.

"Fresh ice water for Miss Lord, please," he said to Cook.

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“And she just wants broth and toast in her room for dinner.”

Cook shook her head and made disapproving noises. “Too upset and exhausted to come to the table, is she? Poor thing! I hope you young hotheads are ashamed of yourselves.”

Nagato nodded guiltily, and I felt sorry for him. “But it wasn’t his fault, Cook,” I said. “They provoked him.”

“Yes,” he agreed, “but I was wrong to let them get me so worked up. Oakland takes worse every day without flicking an eyelash. I wish I could be as controlled as she.” He grinned. “And as tough as you. You’re quite a boxer.”

“It wasn’t exactly boxing, Mr. Nagato,” I said. Another ethnic stereotype shot to hell, I thought.

It was one more thing to reflect on as I helped make dinner, as I sat through the silent meal with Mr. Hopkins frowning at the head of the table, as I climbed three flights of stairs to my room, sandwiched between Mr. Hopkins’ room and Oakland’s. Cook went home to her family at night, Miss Lord had a suite on the second floor, and the male students slept in the dormitory wing. If the Academy ever admits more than a token female student, I thought, sleeping arrangements will be a challenge.

But this was no time to worry about the future. If I didn’t figure things out, the Academy might not have a future. I looked around the room, wishing I had some police background, some idea of how to conduct a search. If I were Paula Muehler, I thought, if I had a secret that got me killed, where would I put it?

The room was tiny and starkly neat, the only trace of personality a faded stuffed bunny propped against the bed’s single pillow. I opened desk drawers methodically, not finding anything more exciting than a sewing kit, crisp travel brochures about the Bahamas, bottles of aspirin and Sominex. The bureau was even less spectacular, filled with sensible nightgowns and often-mended underwear. The closet, though—that was interesting: shapeless uniforms and clunky shoes and uninspired dresses, naturally, but also a five-piece luggage set and an incongruously skimpy bathing suit, price tags still attached. And the prices on those tags weren’t skimpy at all.

What were you up to, Paula? I wondered. *TV Guide* lay on the bedside stand, and I picked it up wearily; at this point, even the tiny set perched on Paula’s bureau looked enticing. But it was last week’s *TV Guide*—the

last one, I realized, she'd bought before she died. I flipped pages, noticing pencil lines next to shows she'd marked. A midnight showing of *Casablanca*, *Drag-net*, and Bob Newhart on Nick at Nite. Well, that explained the Sominex. Life at the Academy must not have been peaceful for Paula. She'd had trouble getting to sleep.

I found a tolerable show and collapsed on the bed, letting my head fall against the pillow. At least I intended to let my head fall against the pillow. Instead I aimed wrong, and my head fell against the stuffed rabbit. I felt a definite bump.

What gives, bunny? I thought, picking it up. You're too old to be fluffy, but you shouldn't be bumpy. But there was a bump, all right—a hard, rectangular one under his tummy. I turned him over and saw a fresh seam down his back. It was sewn so tightly you wouldn't notice it right off, but if you looked closely you could see it was stitched by hand, not machine.

Sorry, bunny, I thought. I fetched Paula's sewing kit, took out her scissors, and snipped. Surgery complete, I slipped my hand into the matted fluff and groped. The first thing I extracted from bunny was a small camera with an empty film chamber and a used-up flash cube. The next thing I extracted was a

thick envelope stuffed with three thousand five hundred and fifty dollars in small bills.

So, I thought, who needs police training? Exulting, I reached for the phone on Paula's bedside table and dialed.

She answered on the first ring. "Miss Woodhouse?" I said. "It's Harriet. I've seen some stuff, and I've found a camera and some money—a lot of money—sewn into Paula's stuffed bunny. I'd like to come by tomorrow, but I don't know if I can get away."

"I'll have Kate arrange it," she said. "You're doing well. But be careful. If you do too well, you may make people nervous."

The next day, right after breakfast, Mr. Hopkins handed me a list and three fifty dollar bills. I was to run some errands for Miss Lord, he said, to buy certain specified items at specified stores, and then return promptly with change and receipts.

The list of errands was nice and long, too long to allow for precise calculations about how long the job should take. An extra half hour wouldn't cause suspicion. Nice job, Miss Woodhouse, I thought, taking the list and speeding off on foot.

At the city dock, I raced from shop to trendy shop, picking up herbal teas and books on inner healing. Once, as I slipped on a patch of ice outside Vital Vita-

mins, I thought I saw something out of the corner of my eye—a thin form in a black coat ducking into the doorway of a seafood restaurant across the street. But when I straightened up and tried to peer through the drifting snowflakes, the black form was gone.

My errands complete, I ran and skidded the two blocks to the pleasantly weatherbeaten grey house with the discreet bronze WOODHOUSE INVESTIGATIONS sign on the door. I let myself in. The Professor rocked by her bay window, sweaty but undaunted as she struggled to knit Argentina; Miss Woodhouse looked up from her computer keyboard and granted me a half smile.

"So, Harriet!" she said. "You have things to tell us?"

I told them everything, from my arrival at the Academy to the black-coated form that might or might not have lurked behind me on my way over. The Professor nodded and hummed as she listened, and Miss Woodhouse frowned, tapping her pencil against her chin.

"You brought the money?" she asked when I finished.

"Yes," I said, handing it to her. "And the camera, too, not that it's worth anything—no film, and a burned-out bulb."

She glanced at the cash and camera. "Interesting," she said.

"Why bother to stitch a camera inside a bunny if the camera has no tales to tell? So. What do you make of all this?"

"Well, Paula must've been the thief," I said, flattered she'd asked for my opinion. "I mean, thirty-five hundred and fifty dollars is a lot for a maid to save up. And if she had saved it honestly, why not put it in the bank? So she stole the Denver tray and the other things and pawned them, and she planned to steal more things and then take off to the Bahamas—that explains the travel brochures and bathing suit and luggage. And maybe a butler caught her stealing something from him—or her—and got mad and killed her."

She half smiled again. "Almost plausible. And the butlers-to-be? What do you think of them?"

I tried not to show how stung I was by the "almost plausible" bit. "Well, Crowe and Swan are playing tricks on Oakland. I'll bet Crowe made a pass at her and she turned him down, and he's mad. And Swan's just mean. As for Parker-Pierce, he likes Oakland, obviously, and she doesn't give a damn about him, just as obviously. Nagato and Oakland are friends, maybe more. When Nagato threatened to tell Miss Lord about the pranks, Crowe said he could tell



her some things, too. So maybe Oakland and Nagato are messing around. Miss Lord wouldn't like that."

"No," Miss Woodhouse agreed. "Kate thinks servants shouldn't have passions."

"Archaic!" the Professor snapped, thrusting her needle through Buenos Aires. "Outmoded! Generally, I approve of things archaic and outmoded, but the idea that affections can be bounded by class and occupation—folly and bigotry, I say."

"And I agree, Mother," Miss Woodhouse said, nodding. "So. What do you think of Harriet's analysis? What must we do?"

The Professor folded Argentina decisively. "Harriet's analysis is imperfect but admirable. You, Iphigenia, would hardly have done as well at her age. And she is nicer than you ever were. Even so, she requires assistance. So you and I shall attend this Patrons' Dinner tomorrow. I shall be the Widow House, of Boston, and you shall be my maiden daughter—a natural part for you to assume, if you'll forgive my saying so. We shall present ourselves as extremely wealthy, the employers of many butlers. I shall wear my black satin and my dear mother's cameo, and you shall wear—well, whatever you can find. Once in Miss Lord's house, we may make observations that

will lead to the speedy resolution of this case, and we shall in any case be on the spot should anything untoward happen. Do you agree?"

"Of course, Mother." She always agreed to whatever her mother suggested. Absently she fingered her keyboard. "And I'll look into some things. I'll make some calls, and I know some codes, and—well. Harriet, you'd better get back to the Academy."

I pulled on my coat and fled. When I turned in my change and receipts, Mr. Hopkins raised his eyebrow and tapped his watch but didn't say anything, so I figured I'd managed well. When I went up to my room, though, I realized someone was onto me. I froze in the doorway, shocked by what I saw. The precisely symmetrical arrangement of comb and brush on the bureau, the wrinkle-free bedspread, the perfectly fluffed pillows—the room was neat, too neat, much neater than it had been when I left it. Obviously it had been searched, and searched by a butler.

I grabbed the bunny from the bed. Yes, those were still my stitches on its back—not as straight as Paula's stitches, but not bad. Had the searcher noticed the difference? Probably not. Probably, if a nervous villain had paid any attention to the bunny before, the camera

and money would have been gone long ago. Probably the search had revealed nothing. Probably.

The rest of the day was a frantic rush of polishing and mopping. The student butlers polished and panted by my side. There were no pranks, no eruptions. The spectre of the patrons' arrival eclipsed everything else. Every inch of the house had to sparkle within twenty-four hours, or we'd all be disgraced. When I fell into Paula Muehler's bed that night, I hardly cared who had killed her. I was just glad the day was done.

The next day was more rush, more bustle. Midmorning, as I chopped prunes for goose stuffing, Mr. Hopkins strode into the kitchen and told me to dust the closet shelves in the guest rooms. I raced off. In the first guest room I discovered no dust. In the second guest room I discovered Oakland and Nagato.

They were a good six inches apart when I flung the door open, but it was obvious they'd jumped apart. Nagato's tie was crooked, and Oakland was frantically retucking her shirt.

"We came here to check the carpet; it is satisfactory," she said, and got the hell out of there. Nagato grinned sheepishly, and shrugged, and followed her.

Ah, I thought, young love.

Thinking wistfully of a certain bearded young man who doesn't much like it when I go under-cover, I opened the closet door, shook my can of Pledge, and set to work. As I stretched to reach the remotest recesses of the shelf, I spotted something—a lumpy something, shrouded in layers of newspaper. What was it doing here? I tugged at it, found it heavy, pulled it down, tore back the newspaper, and was dazzled by the gleam of the silver, the delicacy of the engraving.

It had to be the Denver tray. Now, what should I do—call Miss Woodhouse, tell Mr. Hopkins, do nothing? Stay in character, I decided. Calling was risky, and if I did nothing, the tray might disappear. Harriet the maid would tell Mr. Hopkins.

I found him counting towels. "Oh, Mr. Hopkins," I said. "I found a large silver tray, wrapped in newspaper, in a guest room closet. It looks rather messy. Should I remove it?"

He gulped audibly. "A large silver—that is odd. Nothing of the sort should be in any guest room closet. Show me."

I led him to the closet, pointed, and watched innocently as he reached, grasped, and gasped. "My God!" he exclaimed. "It is the—Harriet!





Have you told anyone of your discovery?"

"No, sir," I said, my face a blank. "Only you."

"Good," he said. "Tell no one else. I shall inform Miss Lord, and after the guests leave, she can—Harriet! Did you observe anything else when you came to this room?"

Only Oakland and Nagato, I thought. "No, sir," I said.

"Very well," he said. "Return to the kitchen. Say nothing about this incident, to anyone."

I nodded and went downstairs. Maybe I'd made a mistake. If I'd called the police, they could've dusted the tray for prints, and maybe identified the thief. Then again, I couldn't imagine any of these butlers leaving fingerprints on anything.

So what did it all mean? Obviously, Oakland and Nagato used the guest room as a meeting place. Did they also use it as a place to stow stolen property? And if Harriet the maid had surprised them in their secret place, might Paula the maid once have done the same? Was that why she was killed? But Oakland and Nagato were the nicest butlers, the last ones I wanted to suspect. Pushing the question aside, I returned to the kitchen.

The butlers were gathering for lunch—a cold but delicious

lunch, cheese and pate and thick hunks of French bread—when Swan rushed in, a dusty wine bottle in his hand.

"All right!" he cried, smacking the bottle down on the table. "What the hell is this, Oakland? Some kind of joke?"

She blinked innocently. "I'm sure I don't know—"

"The hell you don't!" he shouted. "It was you, or Nagato. You're trying to set me up for the thefts, so you planted the 1915 Romanee Conti in my laundry hamper. You hoped Harriet would find it and report it to Hopkins. But I found it first."

Mr. Hopkins, who had been deftly slicing a cucumber, whirled around and peered at the bottle. "Heavens! It is the 1915 Romanee Conti, the bottle missing from the cellar when I did my inventory last month. It was in your hamper, Swan?"

"Yes," Swan said viciously. "Oakland and Nagato put it there. They want to destroy me. They're scared because I know —"

At that promising moment Parker-Pierce stumbled into the kitchen. "Oh my!" he gasped. "It's the colonel's Bentley! I recognize it, Mr. Hopkins, from the flashcards with which you so diligently drilled us. The Bentley is even now pulling into the driveway, two hours early! What shall we do? Oh my!"





That was the end of the conversation about the Romanee Conti. Mr. Hopkins serenely wiped cucumber juice from his hands and walked out to greet the colonel. The student butlers, rallying, smeared pate on bread, swallowed cheese cubes whole, and were at their posts within minutes.

For the next few hours, patrons kept arriving. I don't remember the names—there was the colonel, and the doctor, and the judge, and the fabulously bejeweled older lady I nicknamed the dowager. They were overnight guests, so the butlers and I bowed and curtsied them to their rooms. At six, other guests started flocking in, about a dozen of them. The two I cared most about came in a limousine I knew was rented. Widow House looked regal in her black satin and pale cameo; her daughter looked awkward and angry in a full-skirted white taffeta dress with a long pink sash. I cringed, thinking of the browbeating it must have taken to get Miss Woodhouse into that outfit.

She sneered at the sherry Crowe offered her and demanded scotch, neat. Good for her, I thought. Meekly I took her coat and slipped her the note I'd scrawled on three paper towels while Cook was absorbed in prodding her puddings, the note

quickly but meticulously describing the search of my room, the discovery of Oakland and Nagato and the Denver tray, the incident of Swan and the burgundy bottle. Later, as I unburdened another guest from another coat, I saw Miss Woodhouse sneezing discreetly in a corner, unnoticed by the others as she skimmed each paper towel before blowing her nose in it. Fine, I thought. I've done a conscientious job of informing her about the latest developments in the case. I just hope she doesn't get ink on her nose.

Then I was back in the kitchen, locked with Cook in a grim struggle to keep geese basted, roasts succulent, and gravies lumpless until the guests settled down to dinner. Butlers raced in and out, reloading platters with hot cheese puffs and iced fruits. Oakland looked serene, Nagato excited, Crowe bored, Swan surly, Parker-Pierce unsteady. Once, when I stepped into the pantry to search for a jar of chutney, I saw Parker-Pierce making serious inroads on the cooking sherry, straight from the bottle.

He burped self-consciously. "Just a drop," he said. "Just for my nerves. It's such an evening. You understand."

I did understand. Being a housemaid is not my life's work—with luck, I'd be out of this



place in a day or two—but even so I was awed by the occasion, terrified of making a mistake. It's funny, but I don't think the weight of tradition and expectation had ever before felt so heavy on me. I was here to investigate a murder—what else mattered?—but my main fear at the moment was that the cranberry sauce might not have jelled, or that I might have missed a speck of tarnish on a fork. Yes, I understood how Parker-Pierce felt. And when I saw him duck into the pantry a second time, and a third, I mourned but could not condemn.

Mr. Hopkins came into the kitchen, a faint trace of flush showing above his eyebrows. "They are taking their seats," he announced. "I trust the soup is hot, Cook, and the turbot ready to grill. Harriet, I need your assistance in the dining room."

"My assistance!" I said, astonished. "But Mr. Hopkins! I've never served at table before! I don't know how!"

"You shall do very well," he said, taking me by the elbow. "Just watch me and obey my signals. Parker-Pierce has twice dropped his napkin while pouring champagne, Swan has growled at a guest, and Crowe has insulted Nagato loudly enough for the doctor to hear. I cannot depend upon any of

them. I must have another steady hand at the table, and you must supply it. Come."

It was scary, but it was thrilling—entering that high-ceilinged dining room, seeing the immense table blanketed by the ice-white cloth and set with the nearly transparent china, the cut-glass goblets, the gleaming silver. Even Miss Woodhouse and her mother looked awesome and strange, sitting on either side of the dowager, chatting quietly. At a nod from Mr. Hopkins, Swan, Nagato, and Oakland moved noiselessly into the kitchen, to return moments later with soup tureens. I assisted Parker-Pierce as he served from the tureen Oakland held and was quick enough with my napkin-covered plate to catch the drop of soup that slid from his unsteady silver ladle, the drop that would have splashed on the judge's wrist. Mr. Hopkins nodded approval, and I felt grand.

We got through the fish course smoothly, the guests were nicely impressed by the geese, and we deftly evaded catastrophe when I caught the butter knife Parker-Pierce dropped before it could clatter onto the doctor's plate. It wasn't until Mr. Hopkins was carving the roast that things turned ugly.

It was the judge who started it. He turned benignly to Miss

Lord, smiling beneath his fluffy little mustache. "A flawless dinner, my dear," he said. "This evening certainly gives the lie to those silly rumors one has been hearing."

Miss Lord smiled nervously, and the colonel leaned forward. "What's this?" he demanded. "Rumors? What rumors? What, what?"

"Oh, surely you've heard them," the dowager said, not glancing at Nagato as he refilled her wineglass. "They started after the Patrons' Tea, and that business of the salt in the sugar-bowl. People said that something was dreadfully wrong at the Academy; that the students were playing tricks on each other. But it was nonsense, clearly. They seem a proper class, Kate."

"Thank you," Miss Lord said, barely audibly, not able to look up. It didn't help that Parker-Pierce hiccupped just then, and giggled, and made a nervous little wave of apology.

The doctor glared at him, then looked severely at Miss Lord. "Still, it doesn't do to have rumors," he said. "Even unfounded ones. The Academy should be above suspicion, like Caesar's wife. And there were rumors about the maid's death, too. The police were here several times, were they not?"

Miss Lord tried to look unconcerned. "Yes, they were very

tiresome. But that was all unfounded, too. Paula's death was a sad, sad accident—nothing more."

"And," the doctor persisted, "I have heard something still more disturbing—from my own housemaid, who heard it from her cousin, who heard it from her baker. He said several things had been stolen—stolen!—apparently by one of your students. She said the Denver tray itself is missing. Is that true?"

Miss Lord could barely whisper. "The Denver tray," she managed, "is safe in my room."

Normally it would have done no good to check the students' reactions to such an announcement—they were too well trained to react to anything in front of guests. But tonight, undone by suspense and sherry, Parker-Pierce dropped his silver water pitcher; worse, Swan stared at Miss Lord and exclaimed, "You found that, too?"

It was unforgivable. Proper servants never give any indication they're listening to guests' conversations—even two days in this house had taught me that—and what a thing to say! Miss Lord looked ready to swoon. Mr. Hopkins, catching Nagato's eye, nodded sharply first at Swan, then at the kitchen.

Nagato interpreted the signal correctly—get Swan out of the

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dining room—but he was the wrong person for the job. When he touched Swan lightly on the elbow, Swan knocked his hand away.

“Hands off, creep,” he growled.

Everybody heard. The whole room seemed to dissolve into one gigantic gasp. Parker-Pierce sat down on the floor among his spilled ice cubes and wept. The judge pulled out his heart medicine. The dowager’s hand fluttered to her throat. Then she screamed.

“My emeralds!” she cried. “They’re gone!”

That time Miss Lord did swoon. Mr. Hopkins was beside her in a second, supporting her, his face collapsing with woe. The Professor, sitting on her right, put a comforting arm around her.

“I’ll call the doctor,” Crowe said, heading for the kitchen.

But Miss Woodhouse stood up. Not even the white taffeta could keep her from looking like the authority she obviously was. “Nobody leaves the room,” she said, “until we’ve settled this. Miss Lord will be fine. She set a record in the Newton marathon during her junior year. Years can erode that sort of strength but cannot destroy it. Well, Katie? Shall I handle this?”

Miss Lord still looked lost. “I suppose,” she said.

“Very well,” Miss Woodhouse

said, taking all the guests and butlers in with one commanding glance. “First, my mother and I are not patrons. I am Iphigenia Woodhouse, a private detective. That young woman is Harriet Russo, my assistant. Miss Lord engaged us to investigate the unpleasantness at the Academy. I fear we’ve discovered more than will please her.”

I can’t begin to describe the murmurs. Oakland, who had been standing next to me, jumped back three feet in horror. Parker-Pierce smashed an ice cube against his forehead.

Miss Woodhouse glanced at him and shook her head. “The most pressing need,” she said, “is to locate the emeralds—and I will do that before ten minutes have passed. But other matters come first. You said, judge, that you had heard rumors about students playing tricks on each other; and you, doctor, have heard rumors about thefts. I must tell you that tricks were played and thefts were committed. And the maid’s death was no accident.”

“It was,” Miss Lord said feebly. “It must have been.” But no one was listening. Everyone was watching Miss Woodhouse.

“I’ll start with the tricks,” she said, “for they led to everything else. This fall the Academy admitted its first female student, Miss Oakland. Unfortunately

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for the Academy, she is competent and beautiful. Her competence aroused Mr. Swan's sexist envy. Her beauty aroused Mr. Crowe's sexual desires—and, after she rejected him, his hatred. So they have made her the victim of a series of sometimes vicious pranks."

"That's a lie," Crowe said evenly. "You can't prove it."

She shrugged. "I could," she said, "if it were worth my time. Now, then. The pranks threw the Academy into a turmoil, threatening its very existence—if word got out, the Academy's reputation would be ruined, for who would hire a prank-playing butler? But word didn't get out—at least, not out very far. The loyalty of patrons and staff kept the scandal quiet. Then the thefts began—a more serious matter, since the possibility of a larcenous butler frightens wealthy employers more than the possibility of a merely immature one. Matters became still more serious when the housemaid, Paula Muehler, surprised the thief during the commission of a theft and attempted blackmail."

"You're guessing," Swan protested. "You can't know that."

She shrugged again. "It's less than knowledge," she said, "more than a guess. There is evidence. Paula Muehler was an

insomniac—she took sleeping pills and watched late-night television. I am confident that one night, when the pills failed to calm her and the television to distract her, she heard a noise and investigated. Probably she hoped to catch the thief in the act, and took her camera along. And she did catch the thief—possibly in the act of stealing the Denver tray—and she did pretend to take a picture. In fact she had no film in her camera, but the thief couldn't know that. The flash of Miss Muehler's last bulb convinced the thief she had proof of his or her guilt. That's when Paula Muehler tried blackmail."

Nagato looked skeptical. "How can you know *that*?"

"Because Miss Russo found over three thousand dollars sewn into Miss Muehler's stuffed bunny," she said, "and found new luggage and crisp travel brochures in her room. Miss Muehler had not withdrawn anything from her tiny bank account—when one has access to the right codes, one can check on such things—so the money came from some other source. I hypothesize that Miss Muehler got the money from the thief, as a first payment for her silence, and planned to extract more payments, shed her uniform forever, and spend the rest of her life



on a beach. But the thief was unable or unwilling to make more payments. So he—or she—surprised Miss Muehler when she was cleaning a bathroom, knocked her head against the sink, mixed bleach and ammonia in the tub, and left the weakened Miss Muehler to die of the fumes in the empty house while he—or she—went on the class field trip.”

Oakland was seething. “You keep saying ‘he or she,’” she said. “You obviously consider me a suspect, even though you know I wasn’t responsible for the pranks.”

Miss Woodhouse looked her over. “The pranksters,” she said, “are not necessarily thieves, or murderers. And you have been guilty of indiscretions. You and Mr. Nagato violated the rules forbidding romantic liaisons among members of the staff.”

Parker-Pierce, still sitting on the floor, burped mournfully. “And you broke my heart, Oakland. I love you, more than Nagato does, but you spurned me—just because I’m not as quick with a lint brush. The best butlers always get the girls.”

Miss Woodhouse sighed. “Too many butlers,” she said, “and too much love. Such situations almost inevitably end in murder. But let us focus on the thefts. What was the motive behind them? Greed, we might

suppose—except that this thief didn’t profit from his or her crimes. The burgundy and the Denver tray both resurfaced today; neither had been fenced, as one might have predicted, and I daresay the other stolen items are also hidden in this house. So if the thief did not hope to profit, what did he—or she—hope to accomplish?” She turned suddenly on Miss Lord. “This Academy has been a burden on you, hasn’t it, Katie?”

Miss Lord’s eyes widened. “A burden? Oh no. That is, yes, but I—that is, one couldn’t possibly let Father down.”

“No,” Miss Woodhouse agreed. “At least, you couldn’t. You gave up your fiancé and your chances as an artist and any hope of independence, all because one couldn’t possibly let Father down. He saddled you with this Academy on his deathbed, and you couldn’t possibly let him down. Not openly. But I think the burden was too much. I think it transformed a healthy girl into a fretful hypochondriac. I think it must be hard to see that happening. Then, this fall, I think an opportunity presented itself. The pranks had put the Academy in jeopardy but hadn’t done the job. What if still more disgraceful things happened—thefts, for example—and some of them couldn’t be covered up? The loss of the Denver tray could—

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n't go unnoticed indefinitely. Eventually, the truth would come out, the Academy would close, and you would be free. Was that the plan, Katie?"

Instinctively Miss Lord lifted a hand to Mr. Hopkins, still standing behind her, and he gripped it. "Iphigenia!" she cried. "Are you saying I stole—and I killed—and I—oh, Iphigenia!"

"It was a good plan," Miss Woodhouse went on mercilessly. "You'd be free, but no one could accuse you of betraying your father's wishes. You'd simply be the victim of some treacherous students. But perhaps it would take one last theft to seal the Academy's fate—one grand theft, committed in the presence of the patrons themselves." Her voice became harsher still. "That's a lovely shawl you're wearing, Katie—lovely and large, with deep folds. Stand up, take it off, and shake it out."

Patrons cried out in protest, and every butler in the place gasped. But Miss Lord's face hardened in defiance. Silently, proudly, she stood up, removed her shawl, and gave it one hard, decisive shake. And a necklace thick with emeralds clattered to the floor. At the sound Miss Lord tottered. Mr. Hopkins was there to catch her, and she clung to him gratefully.

"My emeralds!" the dowager

cried. "Katherine! I am shocked!"

The doctor was nodding judiciously. "It makes sense, I'm afraid," he said. "The whole theory makes good sense."

"It does," Miss Woodhouse agreed grimly. "And the emeralds prove it. Harriet, call the police."

"No!" Mr. Hopkins cried out, his voice so clear and sure that it stunned us all. "Do not stir, Harriet. Do not call the police—not yet." Gently he helped Miss Lord to her seat, then straightened up and looked directly at Miss Woodhouse, his eyes free of fear and shame. "Miss Lord," he said, "is incapable of either theft or murder. I am the one who has committed both."

Miss Lord reached up to pat his hand. Already her color was coming back. "Dear Hopkins!" she said. "I know you'd do anything to protect me, but you mustn't lie."

"It is no lie. It is the truth, and I believe that person knew it." He pointed at Miss Woodhouse but not in anger. "I believe she staged the theft and the discovery of the emeralds to prompt a confession. Her ploy has succeeded. I confess."

Miss Lord shook her head stubbornly. "I don't believe it. To steal! To kill poor Paula! Why would you do such things?"

"She told you why." Suddenly,



he was kneeling by her side, clasping her hands, his eyes brimming with unutterable devotion. "Because I wanted to free you from this place. Because I could no longer stand to see what it is doing to you—what it has done to you, all these years. Because I can never forget the strong, happy girl you used to be, the girl I so desperately admired from the moment I came to this house. Because I grieved for decades, seeing that girl slowly ground down by a servitude more absolute than mine. He had no right! Your father—I respected him, but he had no right to bind you to a mission not your own, to a life you never would have chosen. But you were too faithful to his unjust demands. All these years I watched, and knew, and grieved. And then, when these foolish young persons began their tricks, I saw the Academy was not invulnerable. I saw a way to rescue you."

Miss Woodhouse nodded sadly. "And when you saw the tricks weren't enough, you tried theft. But the maid caught you. Did she threaten to show Miss Lord the picture she supposedly took? You couldn't tolerate that—a lifetime of service irrevocably tarnished in an instant. She wanted money, so you emptied your savings account. But she wanted more, didn't she?"

"Much more," he said bitterly. "She wanted me to sell the tray and steal other things from Miss Lord and sell them, and make her rich. But I could never steal from Miss Lord, not really. I always intended to allow everything to be found again."

"I believe you," Miss Woodhouse said. "And recent events made you move your plans ahead. It was you who followed Miss Russo yesterday. Had her martial arts skills made you suspect she wasn't simply a maid? Did you see her enter my house, and see the Woodhouse Investigations sign? Did you know then that you had a private detective in your house, and search her room, hoping to find any evidence Paula Muehler had left behind?"

"I did," he admitted, "but I found nothing." He looked up proudly. "And I tidied up before I left."

Miss Woodhouse smiled briefly. "Indeed. So, knowing a detective was in the house, you tried to misdirect suspicion. You put the tray in a guest room, probably knowing Miss Oakland and Mr. Nagato met there secretly, and you put the burgundy in Mr. Swan's hamper. You hoped Miss Russo would discover both items."

"Correct." Mr. Hopkins stood up, brushing imaginary specks of lint from his lapels, and faced

Miss Woodhouse. "Your analysis of these events has been excellent. In engaging you, Miss Lord has shown her usual fine judgment. Harriet, you may summon the police. I will submit to their authority."

"Oh, poor Hopkins!" Miss Lord cried, and reached for his hand again. But he pretended not to see. He had indulged in one moment of honest passion and was the proper butler again.

It was a heartwrenching evening. The police came, took statements, and led Mr. Hopkins away. Miss Lord, pains and pills forgotten, insisted on going along. Oakland and Nagato wept in a corner; Parker-Pierce finished the cooking sherry, opened and emptied the 1915 Romanee Conti, then vomited quietly at intervals; Crowe and Swan fell to accusing each other, fell to punching each other, then simply fell; the patrons convened, agreed the Academy was a sad mistake, and withdrew their support. The Academy no longer existed. Mr. Hopkins had triumphed.

For no real reason I decided to clear the table. When I carried a load of dishes into the kitchen, I found Cook and the Professor arm-in-arm by the stove, dunking slabs of plum pudding into a vat of hard sauce and daring each other to add more rum.

"You *shall* say it," the Profes-

sor was insisting. "You must often have longed to say it, all these years. Say it now."

"Oh, but I couldn't," Cook protested, giggling. "It wouldn't seem respectful-like, to poor Mr. Hopkins."

"Nevertheless," the Professor said, "someone must sooner or later say it, and you are the proper person."

"All right then, I'll say it." Cook took a deep breath. "I'll say—the butler did it!"

They both erupted in hysterical laughter. I set down my dishes and glared at them. "I'm glad somebody finds all this amusing," I said. "A woman is dead, and a sad, misguided man is headed for prison, and you're making jokes!"

The Professor dabbed at her eyes with a dishtowel. "Forgive us, sweet Harriet," she said. "It is catharsis. We must joke at this juncture lest we be overcome by pity and fear."

"Maybe," I said, not satisfied. "But tell me this. How did the emeralds end up in Miss Lord's shawl? You were sitting between her and the dowager, and you've often bragged about your skills as a pickpocket. How could you be sure she'd survive the shock of being accused? She could've had a heart attack!"

"No danger of that," the Professor said, sobering. "Iphigenia

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assured me that Katherine Lord's ills are imaginary, that she is in fact quite hardy. True, our course of action may seem in some ways brutal. But we had a murderer to expose, and a woman to set free, and we accomplished both tasks."

Miss Woodhouse came into the kitchen then, dragging the semiconscious Parker-Pierce with one hand, clutching the squirming Crowe's ear tightly with the other—he'd made a final appeal to Oakland and had gotten into a fistfight with Nagato, and Miss Woodhouse had had to break it up. She looked once at Parker-Pierce, once at Crowe, then let both drop. "Too many butlers," she said, shaking her head sadly, "and too much love."

A year later we were sitting in the Woodhouses' back parlor watching the eleven o'clock news after a prolonged stakeout and stuffing ourselves with olive-and-onion croissants from the Two Nagatos Deli—the Professor had given Oakland the recipe as a wedding present—when we saw a familiar face on the screen.

"Look!" I cried. "It's Miss Lord! At the art show!"

Miss Woodhouse looked up with interest. "So Katie's back

from Italy. And what's this about first prize?"

We munched as we watched the interview. Miss Lord looked wonderful—rosy and energetic and almost plump, wearing a beret and a peasant blouse and a long quilted skirt she'd probably last put on in the sixties. Yes, she said, her winning painting was indeed a portrait of a real person. She'd painted it during her weekly visits to him in prison. And for how long, the interviewer asked, would this man remain in prison? Well, Miss Lord said, the jury had been compassionate, and the judge had been kind, and the man was setting world records for good behavior. But she didn't know how soon the warden would be willing to part with him. Apparently the state prison had never been tidier.

"And what," the interviewer asked, "is the title of this marvelous portrait?"

Miss Lord stepped to one side to allow the camera an unimpeded view of the canvas, of the thin, greying man regal in his prison denims, eyes steady and chin proud as he gripped his slender mop and pristine bucket, fearlessly confronting the slackness of the modern world.

"I call it," Miss Lord said simply, "'Devotion.'"

# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the June issue.*

Chief Lefevre frowned as he put down the receiver. "Trouble out at the Fargo Apartments again, Tex. This time it's murder, according to that phone call."

"Who was calling, chief?" asked Detective Tackett.

"Wouldn't give his name. Some man. Sounded serious."

"It doesn't surprise me. They ought to call that old rattrap the Fargone. If it weren't for the housing shortage, nobody would live there, but with all the new construction around town, workers have been pouring in from everywhere. This makes the fourth time this week I've had to go out there—drunk and disorderly, break-ins, assault, bodily threats, and now this."

Detective Tackett parked in front of the six story apartment building. The janitor came out to meet him, a familiar figure from past encounters. "Hello, Hank," said Tackett. "We got a call about a murder. Know anything about it?"

"I'm the guy who phoned. Ain't there a television crew coming? This is the real thing, sir."

"Let's get to business," said the detective. "If there *has* been a murder, I need to get busy."

"I'm comin' to it," said the janitor. "But first you gotta understand the situation. All six floors of the Fargo now has a couple on each floor—that includes Mr. and Mrs. Rankin. These renters come from all different states (one even come here from Wisconsin), and each man does something different for a livin'—one guy is a plumber. I git along with all the men, even old Carl; him and me drink a bit of beer together now and then—but never to git drunk, y'understand—"

"Dammit, man," said Detective Tackett, "just tell me who was killed."

A pained expression flitted across Hank's face. "I'm just givin' you the necessary background, sir. . . ."

(1) "Alice ain't married to Alex, and Betty ain't married to Bart. Come to think of it, no man and wife have the same first initial.

(2) "Elsie (who ain't married to Fred) lives just below the fat lady from Virginia, who is just below the hardware dealer's wife. Their husbands are all still alive.

(3) "Alice's apartment is just above the lady who come here from Texas, who is just above Mrs. Pardee. Their husbands include Alex, Danny, and Bart. Bart's not the carpenter. None of them was killed either.

(4) "Another thing I oughtta tell you: Betty, Danny's wife, and Mrs. North include the women from Tennessee, South Carolina, and Utah. The couple from Utah ain't on the first or the top floor.

(5) "The mason lives just below Elmer and just above Flora. Their last names are McCoy, Oxnam, and Queen—but maybe not in exactly that order.

(6) "Betty has the apartment just above the electrician and just below Bart, who is just below Mr. Queen.

(7) "I nearly fergot to mention that Clara's apartment is higher in the buildin' than that of the lumberyard owner, but neither she nor Danny's wife is on the top floor.

(8) "The lady from Tennessee lives just below Diane. Them two women are worried about poor Mrs. McCoy, who's scared half to death because she's in the apartment just above the hot-headed red-bearded guy that killed the other man this mornin'.

"There now," said Hank, smiling with satisfaction. "*That* oughtta give you the layout—what they call the scene of the crime. Now, as fer particulars as to who killed who—"

"Don't bother," snapped Detective Tackett. "I now *know* the identities of both the victim and the killer."

*Who is the red-bearded killer? Whom did he murder?*

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See page 135 for the solution to the April puzzle.

FICTION

# MOROCCO

## Robert Loy

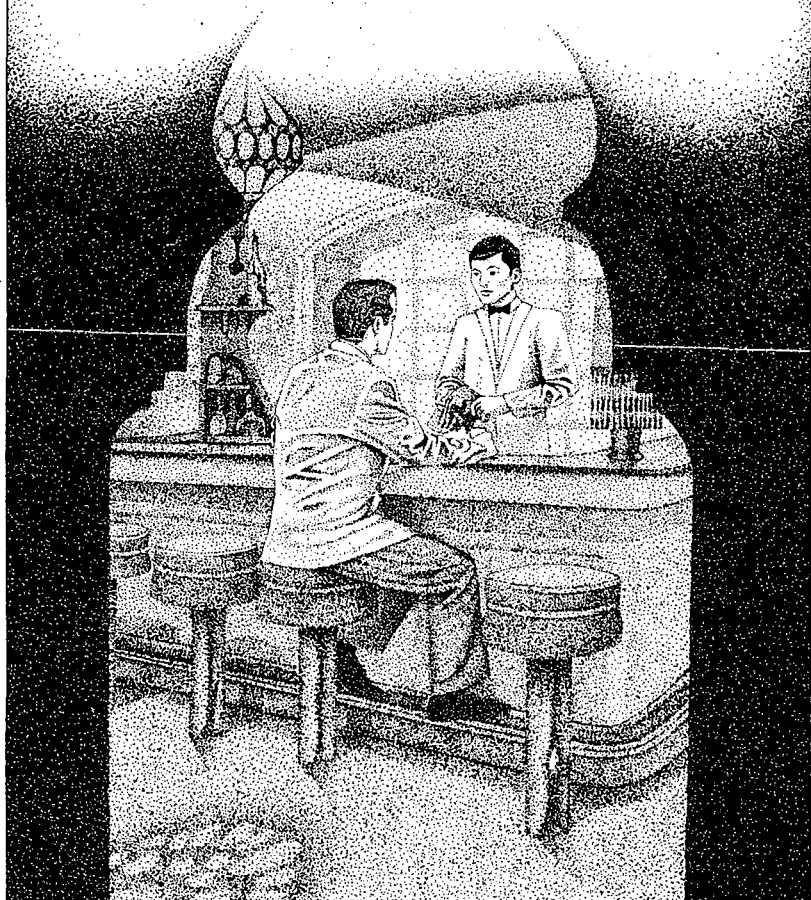


Illustration by David Monette

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December 4, 1941

Dear Sis,

What an unexpected treat it was to get your letter of September ninth. I say unexpected because the mail service is extremely unreliable. Nobody really knows if it's the French or the Germans in charge here, but it looks to me like none of them are as good as old Halfwit Henderson when it comes to getting mail somewhere close to its intended destination.

I'm so glad to hear that everybody's doing good back home, and I'm especially glad that Granny finally agreed to get treatment for her cataracts. I never thought she'd actually use any medicine that wasn't squeezed from corn and consumed from a Mason jar.

If anybody else asks you what I'm doing in the war, tell them that they also serve who only stand (all aching night) and wait on drunks and deserters. Actually, my greatest wish is that the United States won't be drawn into this horrible war; I hope Dad's faith in President Roosevelt is well placed.

Yes, I do get homesick at times, but there's not much I can do about it—what with the crazy political situation here and all the restrictions on travel. You ask what brings a "country boy from Macon, Georgia,"

like me to North Africa, and I'm tempted to say it was a big boat, but I think you deserve a better answer than that, and the truth is I'm here in Morocco because of Douglas Fairbanks.

Well, not just Douglas Fairbanks. The movies, Sis. It's all because of the movies.

I know you know how much I love the movies—enough to get up way before dawn every summer morning delivering papers just so's I'd have that dime for admission on Saturday and another dime for popcorn and Pepsi—but I don't think you realize how much they've influenced me. My idea of honor and what a man should be was formed by watching (eight times) *Beau Geste*. The picture in my mind of the perfect woman looks and sounds exactly like Greta Garbo. My vision of the relationship between men and women has never strayed far from Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I like to think I have a fairly sophisticated sense of humor, but Laurel and Hardy had so much to do with my upbringing that sometimes I'll bust out laughing if I just see a ladder.

So, Sis, the answer to your question is that the lush, dark room in downtown Macon known as the Rialto, with its flickering images of foreign lands, beautiful women, thrilling adventures, and brave,

dashing heroes, instilled in me a thirst for travel, new lands, strange sights, and unusual people.

And I have certainly seen some strange sights here in this new land—genuine heroes and suspected traitors, a Portuguese midget who does a dead-on impersonation of Winston Churchill. We got spies and pickpockets and prostitutes, and there was even a shooting here at the bar the other night. But by far the strangest sight of all was my boss, Richard Blaine, asking me for advice.

We were closed for the night—in fact we were closed indefinitely, since the police had raided us the night before. And I was taking advantage of the opportunity to clean and restock the bar. Mr. B was sitting at his usual table with his usual bourbon, chain-smoking Chesterfield cigarettes and scowling, same as usual.

But something was different. Something had been different for a couple of days now. It was like the demons that haunt my boss had brought up some reinforcements and were attacking him on an entirely new flank.

I didn't know what was bothering him, but I knew better than to ask. Nobody was there but me and him; Sam and Carl and the head bartender—a Russian, but a real nice fella

anyway, even if he does kiss my cheeks whenever he's happy or excited, and he's usually one or the other—were enjoying the rare day off, I reckon.

Out of the blue Mr. B says to me, "You might have a new boss tomorrow, Hollywood."

That's my nickname here—Hollywood. I reckon you can guess why.

"How do you mean?" I asked him.

"I mean I sold the place," and then he hesitated before going on. "That is, I'm thinking of selling the place."

I didn't say nothing, just kept on washing glasses, and Mr. B moseyed over to the piano and lightly fingered the keys. I've seen the boss play the officials here for fools, and I've seen him sit there and play chess by himself for hours, but I'd never seen him play the piano before.

"Hollywood," he said as his thick fingers stumbled over the ivories, "I want to ask your opinion about something."

I dropped the glass I was washing—my very first, believe it or not. I didn't even break a glass the night I had to tackle a big hairy Italian guy who thought he had been cheated at the roulette wheel and decided to make up for it by snatching as many bottles of rye whisky as he could tuck and run with.

But I couldn't help it. The sun



coulda rose up in the west at midnight and I'd've been a lot less stunned. Mr. B just does not ask employees their opinions. He's not mean, Sis, I don't want you to think that—he's just aloof. If it's true that no man is an island, then Mr. B is at least a peninsula.

He picked his bourbon glass up off the table and carried it over to the bar. Holding onto the bottle with both hands I refilled it for him.

"What is it, Mr. B?" I said, my voice cracking like Mickey Rooney's used to do. I started to tell him I was more comfortable dishing out alcohol than advice. But that was against all the unwritten rules of this place. Mr. B does not fraternize with the help, and the help does what Mr. B says, without question. Just because the boss had chosen to violate his half of this contract did not mean I was going to do the same with my half.

"There's this girl," he said.

For one scary minute I thought that's all he was going to give me to go on. Then he went on like a floodgate had been opened. I'd never seen Mr. B talk fast before—it was a real night of firsts.

"And she's leaving for America in the morning, only she don't know it. I know it—at least I think I know it. Maybe she isn't. Maybe we'll just stay here and

lie low for a while. But if she does go, then I don't know who's going with her—me or her husband."

(Sis, I know you're probably starting to worry about me right about now, what with fellas kissing me and men running around with women who are married to someone else. I know stuff like this don't happen in Macon, and I was shocked at first, too. But things are different here in Morocco. Sometimes very different.)

"Well, do you love her?" I asked, stalling for time more than anything else.

He took a big sip of bourbon. I know it must have been big 'cause it made him wince and Mr. B sometimes has bourbon and eggs for breakfast.

"I don't know, I suppose I do—but hell, Hollywood, what difference does that make? Love don't matter a hill of beans these days, the war is what's important, right?"

"Boss, I don't know nothing about what is or what ain't important. I'm kinda like Will Rogers in a way. I mean all I know is what I've seen at the movies. And I've seen a million movies where—no matter what the odds or the obstacles—the guy and the girl get together at the end of the picture; I've seen so many that all the guys and the girls and the movies all run



together in my mind. And ya know, I think maybe that's *why* the picture always ends there, with the guy and the girl getting together, 'cause what happens after is not always happily ever, if you know what I mean."

Mr. B narrowed his eyes at me.

"Yeah, so?"

I guess he thought I musta misunderstood what he'd said, changing the subject that way, but I understood just fine. I understood I'd better swing the conversation around to something I felt more comfortable with. Love I don't know nothing about, but movies I do.

"So, I only seen one movie where the guy and the girl don't end up together—and that was one called *Gone with the Wind* which was out a couple of years ago. Did you see it?"

Mr. B shook his head. "I don't get to the movies much."

"Well, they were in love and all, but he up and left her flat in the end. I could not believe it. And that movie just burned itself a place in my memory. I mean I just sat there with my mouth hanging open. I knew as soon as I saw it that I would never forget it."

"So you're telling me to let her go?" he said, lighting another Chesterfield.

"No, no, no, I'm not." I really didn't want to tell him anything,

if you want to know the truth. "But it don't sound to me like you're a hundred percent sure you're willing to do what you gotta do to be with her, and if you're not a hundred percent sure—" I left the rest unsaid.

I just couldn't tell this man what to do. I used to—all right, still do sometimes—pretend I'm living in a movie that I'm the star of, but if I'm honest with myself, I know that even if my life were a movie I'd probably be only a bit player in it, lucky to get even one line. But Mr. B would be a star.

"So what did the guy in the movie do?" Mr. B asks.

"Rhett Butler," I said and suddenly realized that the man who dumped Scarlett O'Hara had the same initials—R.B.—as my boss. I didn't point this out to him, however, as I didn't want him to think I was suggesting anything. "He said he didn't give a damn—if you'll excuse my French—what happened to the girl, and then he walked slam out."

Mr. B looks away, thinking.

I probably should have left it at that and shut the heck up, but I was talking about my favorite movie of all time and I just couldn't stop.

"And maybe it's just the way I was raised up down South, to be polite and not use profanity, or maybe it's from working in a

bar for so long, but I can't help thinking the movie could have been even better if instead of cursing her he'd just raised his glass and toasted her before he left."

"Toasted? You mean like, 'Here's mud in your eye'?"

"Well, something like that, only I was thinking more along the lines of something a little sweeter, something like, I don't know, 'Here's to ya' or something."

Mr. B thought out in space for a few more minutes, then picked

up his pack of Chesterfields and went upstairs to his room.

"Thanks, kid," he said before he left.

But I don't really feel like I helped him much. Talking about movies when he needed some solid advice about real life.

It got me off the hook, but that was about it. 'Cause if there's one thing I've learned it's that—more's the pity—life just isn't like the movies.

Your loving brother,  
Edmund

FICTION

# Copperhead Jack Meets Bigfoot

Stuart R. Ball



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 5/96

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**I** was sitting around Joe's place trying to stay out of the sun when Copperhead Jack stomped in, madder than a snakebit bear.

"I've had it!" he shouts to no one in particular, throwing his hat down on the table. I didn't say anything because I knew he'd let on why he was so het up as soon as he had everyone's attention.

"What's the problem, Jack?" asked Sheriff Brady.

So then Jack got to tell how ten or so of those "city snakes" had ridden their motorcycles onto his property. They were riding around the yard tearing up the weeds that Jack lets grow to keep the dust down and throwing dirt all over the windows. This made Jack real mad, since the windows were open at the time. So Jack shouts out at them to quit all the commotion. The boss got off his motorcycle and came stomping up to Jack's door.

"Wait a minute," I said. "How did you know he was the boss?"

"Well, I just figured he must be," Jack replied. "He had the biggest motorcycle and the most little silver doodads all over his leather jacket. Which wasn't none too clean, I might add."

So anyway, the boss man kicks at Jack's door, and when Jack opens it, he grabs Jack by the collar and says something

about how he doesn't like his attitude. It's not a real good idea to grab Jack by the collar, or by anything else, because it tends to get him riled. Anyway, Jack reaches up above the door and grabs the 30.06 that he keeps there and shoves it into boss man's chin. Boss man gets real wide-eyed and starts backing up, with Jack using the barrel of the rifle to help him along. Jack tells him to take his good-for-nothing friends and leave. And just to make the point, Jack shoves the boss man to the ground and blows a hole in his motorcycle. He had to shoot through the leg of one of the gang who was standing in front of it, but I'm sure that didn't bother Jack too much. Anyway, boss man starts scrambling backwards like a crawdad after you move his rock, and the rest of them are trying to get their motorcycles started before Jack decides to shoot another one, and the guy he shot is rolling around on the ground, holding his leg and screaming bloody murder. One of the others pulled a little gun, but he saw Jack work the pump on his rifle and decided not to take the chance. Anyway, one of them grabbed the guy with the shot leg and dragged him onto the back of a bike; then they all rode off down the hill. They were in such a hurry they didn't even use the

path, they just went over the rocks and logs and stuff, scattering little pieces of their motorcycles all over the place. Jack tossed a few of them on the table just to prove his point.

Jack felt better after he told us about all this. He drew a pretty good crowd during the story, and he always likes to tell his stories to a crowd. So he repeated the part about shooting the motorcycle, and everyone laughed, and Sheriff Brady allowed that those motorcycle types were lucky to have gotten off so easy.

Jack was still in a pretty good mood when a city type came into Joe's place. He wasn't like one of the motorcycle guys, but he definitely wasn't from around these parts. He marched right up to the bar, turned around, and said, "I'm looking for a guide." At this Jack kicked me under the table and snickered. The stranger pulled out a bigger wad of money than I've ever seen at one time, and the place got real quiet. Now that he had everyone's attention, he went on. "I'm willing to pay someone who knows the backwoods and hills a hundred dollars a day to help me find one of these." He held out a drawing of a big shaggy animal that stood on two legs. A couple of people in the room laughed, real quietlike. This wasn't the first city dude to

come to these parts talking about bigfeet. Most of them were tourists worried about meeting one. This guy wanted to go looking for them. No one volunteered, though. So the stranger made another offer: "I'll pay a five hundred dollar bonus if I come back with a clear picture that I can sell." At this Jack grabbed me by the arm and hauled me to my feet.

"My partner and I will do it," he said. "Two hundred dollars a day. Each."

The stranger looked around the room to see if anyone else wanted to top Jack's offer. Everyone knew better, so the stranger came over and stuck out his hand. "You've got a deal," he said. "I'm Harley Gage. What are your names?"

Jack pumped the stranger's hand like they were old friends. "They call me Copperhead Jack," he said. "And this here's my partner, Billy Cobb." I wasn't too sure what Jack had in mind, but I was a little worried. The last time Jack saw a wad of cash like that it nearly got us killed.

Harley pulled up a chair to talk over the arrangements. "Here's the deal," he said. "I've been looking for a bigfoot picture for the last five years. I heard about a few sightings around here, and I want to look in this area. I've got all the sup-

plies we need. I'll give you a hundred dollars up front, and the rest I'll put on deposit at the bank and give to you when we get back. Including the bonus if I get the picture." This Harley character was no dummy. He wasn't going out in the sticks with a wad of cash and two strangers.

Jack nodded. "Okay," he said. "Let's go look at your truck and see what you've got. We can start out tomorrow morning."

I was surprised when I saw the truck. It wasn't a beat-up old pickup like the ones me and Jack drove. It looked like it would go over rocks, trees, bears, or anything else that got in your way. And Harley wasn't kidding when he said he had supplies. He opened up the back of the truck, and it looked like the store over in Silverville that sells guns and tents and what-not. There were even a bunch of little cans of food like you see in those army movies.

Jack looked the stuff over. If he was impressed, he didn't show it. "Okay," he said. "This looks all right. Meet us here tomorrow morning about seven, and we'll get going." So Harley shook hands with me and with Jack and got into his high-dollar truck and drove away.

After he was out of sight, I turned to Jack. "What are you trying to pull?" I asked. "What

are you going to tell that guy when he doesn't get to see a bigfoot?"

"Now, don't get all worked up," said Jack. "We'll just lead him around in the woods for a couple of days until his feet hurt; then we'll come back here and get the money. I didn't promise him a bigfoot. I just promised to help him look for one."

Well, I decided that wasn't so bad. After all, this guy said he'd been hunting bigfeet for five years without getting a good picture. So he couldn't expect too much this time, could he? And if he wanted to pay me two hundred dollars a day to go walking in the woods, I sure wasn't going to turn it down.

Harley showed up the next day dressed like he'd done this kind of thing before. His boots looked as if they'd seen some climbing, and I decided wearing him down might not be as easy as Jack thought. Jack looked like he always did, except he had a carbine slung over his shoulder and a .44 revolver on his belt. I didn't see a knife, but he probably had one in each boot. Harley had a camera.

"Do you really think you'll need those guns?" he asked us.

"I wouldn't go out into those woods without one, or maybe two," said Jack. I didn't like the way he said it. I didn't know if

he was trying to scare Harley, but it sure sent chills up my back.

We all piled into the truck and started off for the hills, with Harley driving and Jack pointing the way. I think Jack was trying to soften Harley up because all the trails he picked were rougher than a corn cob. He sure softened me up some. We went along like this till about noon, when we came to the end of a tall bluff. Jack said we ought to stop for lunch. So we got out those little cans of food and some kind of crackers and had lunch. I decided I didn't think I'd like the army much if they had to eat like that all the time.

"Well, where to now?" asked Harley.

"Can't take the truck past here. Have to walk," said Jack.

Harley nodded and opened up the truck, taking out three backpacks. "What's in these?" I asked.

"Mmm, food for about five days, sleeping bag, shovel, first aid kit, a few other odds and ends. Make sure they're comfortable. They get heavy after a while." I put one on, thinking they weren't so light already. Jack didn't seem to mind. Or maybe he just wanted to show this city feller that he wasn't any tougher than us local folk. I was beginning to wonder. Har-

ley tossed each of us a couple of canteens full of water, and we started out. We walked all afternoon, and I was sure glad when it started to get dark and Jack said we should stop for the night. Harley looked like he was ready to keep going, though. I decided he must have done this before.

We got a campfire going and ate, and then Harley started telling us about a trip to Africa.

"I was determined to get a closeup of that rhino," he was saying. "My guide said we should leave. But I walked up closer and closer until he started to charge. I let him get just as close as I could, then I snapped a couple of shots and ran for the Jeep. But the guide flooded it trying to get it started. We both jumped out just as the rhino hit it. He must have caught the fender just right because he flipped it over on its side. Then he ran around the Jeep to the side we were on, which had been the top, so we ran around to the other side. All this time that rhino kept punching holes in the Jeep with his horn. He finally managed to make a hole in the hood, and then he left. I guess he didn't like the taste of gasoline. The guide and I waited till he was gone, then pulled the Jeep back over and drove it away. Got some great pictures out of that."

"Why didn't you just shoot the rhino?" asked Jack.

"Didn't have a gun. Don't carry one."

"Sounds like you could have used one there."

"Wouldn't have done any good. By the time that rhino was close enough to get good pictures, it would have been too late to shoot. He would still have run over me before he died. Rhinos are hard to kill."

Not to be shown up by this tidbit of information, Jack offered his own brand: "Yeah, like a grizzly. Shoot one in the heart and it takes him about seven seconds to figure out he's dead."

Then Jack told about the time he found himself facing down two grizzlies, and with only his revolver in his belt. After that Harley told another story, about polar bears, which he allowed were "bigger and meaner than grizzlies, and kill just for the fun of it." I figured this might go on all night, so I got into my sleeping bag and left them trying to top each other's stories.

I woke up the next morning as sore as a boil on a snake's belly. I wasn't going to say anything if Jack didn't, though. And sure enough, we had a tin can breakfast and strapped those packs on again. Jack and Harley looked like they were in a hurry to get them on, even like they might have been trying to beat

each other to it. I was beginning to hope we did see a bigfoot just so I could get this over with.

We'd worked our way down to a stream by lunchtime. "Fill the canteens in the stream," Jack said after we ate. "I'm going downriver to find us a good place to hunt bigfeet." He came back about an hour later and said he'd found a real good spot about a half mile downstream. "There's a clearing beside the river, and the tracks say all the animals go here to drink. If there's bigfoot around, this is where we'll find 'em."

We set Harley and his camera up in a kind of lean-to back in the brush so he could see what came and went from the river. Then Jack said the two of us were going hunting for rabbit because he was tired of canned food. I was surprised at this, since I never knew Jack to be too particular about what he ate as long as he didn't have to work too hard for it. Anyway, he sent me around one side of a hill and he went to the other side, and we looked for rabbits. It was about dusk when I heard something that sure sounded like motorcycle engines. I thought I was imagining it, but then I heard shouting over the hill. I ran up to the top, and when I looked down, I saw Jack surrounded by a whole bunch of guys with their motorcycles parked behind



them. I guessed these were the same ones that Jack had had the run-in with. How they found us out there in the middle of nowhere is something I'll never figure out. There were about eight of them, so I thought I'd better get down there or Jack was likely to do something that would get us all in trouble. As I started down the hill, those guys were carrying on like hounds with a treed coon. I slipped and slid about twenty feet down the side of the hill, and then I could see them a lot better. I wasn't nearly as impressed with them as when Jack told us about them. They were big all right, but not one of them looked like he could toss a bale of hay more than about four feet. Still, there were eight of them. Then I heard Jack shouting something that sounded like a foreign language. About the time I got to the bottom of the hill, these big shaggy, well, *things* ran out of the trees. I was scared spitless. They looked a lot bigger and meaner than the sketch Harley had showed us, plus the one in the sketch didn't have fangs. One of the motorcycle guys looked around and let out a yelp, then the others turned around, and then they ran off in all directions, with the bigfeet right behind them. One of the bigfeet ran right by me. And I thought pigs smelled bad.

After the motorcycle gang and the bigfeet had disappeared into the trees, Jack came over to where I was standing and said something about going for Harley. After what I'd just seen, I figured he'd been eaten alive already, and I was wondering when it was our turn. But Jack pushed me in the general direction of the clearing to get me started, and we ran back to where we'd left him. We'd just got into the clearing when we saw this bigfoot come running from the other side, making right for the place where Harley was hid. I figured Harley was too scared to move or else he was gone already. But when the bigfoot was almost to the lean-to, I saw a couple of bright flashes. I guess that was Harley's camera. The bigfoot stopped and rubbed its eyes, and Harley came running out and made for the nearest tree. I never saw anyone climb a tree that fast, not even my nephew Sid when his pa was chasing him. About the time Harley got high enough to be out of reach, the bigfoot got to the tree and started shaking it. Harley was hanging on for dear life, and the top of the tree was waving like a clothesline on a windy day, and so help me, Jack was laughing so hard he had to sit down. I couldn't see what was so funny about all this.

"Come on, Jack," I said. "You just going to sit there and let that critter eat ol' Harley?"

He quit laughing long enough to say it wasn't going to eat ol' Harley, but then Harley lost his grip and almost fell out of the tree and Jack started up laughing again. I kicked him on the leg and told him to do something or I would. So he stood up and raised his rifle. It took him awhile to aim, since he kept chuckling the whole time. He put a slug into the tree about six inches above the bigfoot's hands or paws or whatever they were.

"Come on, Jack," I said. "I've seen you shoot better than that on a dark night half drunk."

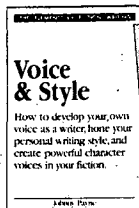
"I don't want to kill it," he said. "I just want to scare it off."

It seemed to work because the bigfoot stopped shaking the tree and ambled toward the edge of the clearing. Harley waved to us and started climbing down. When the bigfoot reached the edge of the clearing, it turned and looked back at us. Jack waved to it, and I'll be danged if it didn't wave back. I must have

looked as surprised as a pig that bit the wrong end of a snake because Jack grinned at me, dug me in the ribs, and said, "Let's go get Harley. I want my money."

We got back to town without seeing any more bigfeet, for which I was relieved, and Jack and me got our money from Harley. Most of the motorcycle guys found their way out after a few days, but they wouldn't go back in after their bikes even when a couple of people offered to help. Someone told me that the motorcycle guys had come into town looking for Jack and followed us into the woods when they found out which direction we'd gone.

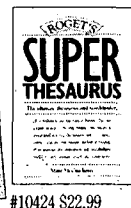
Harley's pictures got in all the big city newspapers, and now people come from all around to hunt for bigfeet. They don't see one very often, but every time the guide business gets slow, Jack hauls off into the woods, and right after that someone reports a sighting. Jack had to get himself a new partner, though. That's one patch of woods I ain't never going into again.



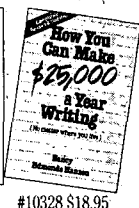
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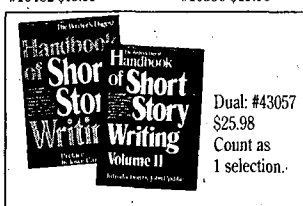
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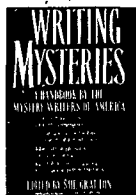
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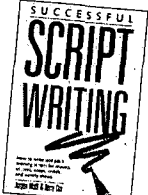
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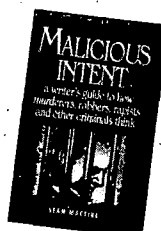
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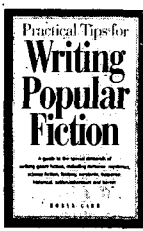
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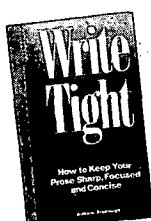
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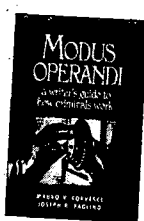
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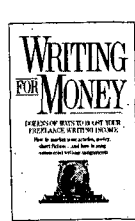
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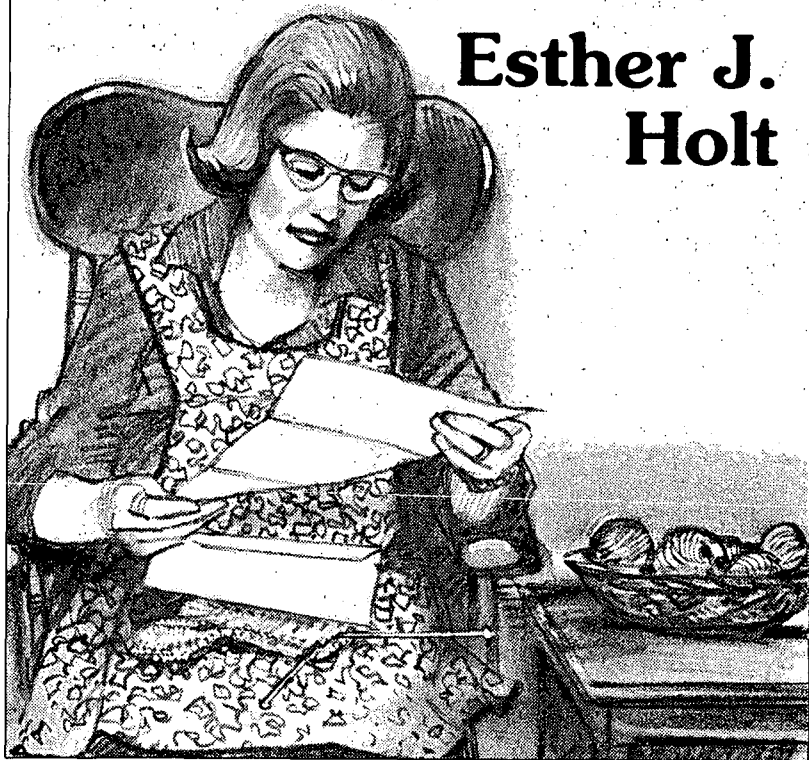
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# OUR FAYE


Esther J.  
Holt



**F**aye Thomas—Ramsey—came home today. Her arrival was reported on local radio and, almost as an afterthought, on television. I think one of the nosy people who telephoned me said *Entertainment Tonight* had tacked it on at the end of a show.

I was also asked, more than once, "What are you going to do, Rena?" "Will you be talking to the TV people?" "Do you think they'll make a TV movie about your story?"

It's not *my* story. And, yes, I imagine we'll be seeing television people all over the place piling drama on top of the truth. I'll be des-



ignated as such a strange antisocial child one can only wonder what she saw or did on that day.

Back then I didn't talk to anyone but the sheriff, and I haven't talked to anyone since. Any quotes the true crime magazines credited to me I never said. No eight-year-old child could have said such things.

Out of respect for my privacy, my dear husband has gone off to spend the day with some of our grandchildren. Before he left, he disconnected our telephone. If someone is crass enough to come to the door, I don't have to be home to them.

I have no doubt that if Mr. Bradford's theater was still open the town fathers would hold an open house there with Faye's closed coffin as a stand for one of her most glamorous photographs. Area newspaper headlines make me gag. WELL-LOVED NATIVE DAUGHTER COMES HOME. OUR FAYE RETURNS TO US. I didn't go into town to see whether the flags were flying at half-staff, but it wouldn't have surprised me. During the Second War, Faye did go along on tours to sell bonds as well as do U.S.O. tours.


Until Faye Thomas was mixed up in that brutal murder, she was just another pretty girl who went to town on Saturdays. Birch Mills drew a lot of pretty girls on Saturdays. Entire families came from out in the country to shop and visit with each other.

Of course, once Faye began appearing in the movies, everyone knew her. Mr. Bradford had to run extra showings of even her worst movies. People would come out onto the sidewalk telling each other when they'd last seen her. Later, after she'd become such a successful character actress, they'd watch for her name on all the television shows, too. She was in everything from the weekly Westerns to *Kraft Theatre* and *Playhouse Ninety*.

I never saw her in any of her roles, not even the Oscar nomination. I tried once, kind of tucked in among the other kids, but someone noticed and the whispering started. Momma hadn't wanted me going anyhow.

There was a time when I couldn't see enough of Faye Thomas. I even protected her once, but no more. If anyone asks me about her, I might just show them the one and only letter I ever received from her. First I'd cut off the P.S.

Faye had come from a farm on the other side of Birch Mills to look after her brother Lew's family while his wife recuperated from having a baby. In those days a new mother was practically bedridden for two weeks after the birth. Someone would move in and take over



her work. The Thomas house was one of those scattered along the cement road going up the hill. Nearly the entire village was strung out along there. There wasn't much level land to stretch any farther than a yard and vegetable garden.

It used to bother me that I was the one who told her to go to California to live her dream. At times the guilt made me sick. Over time I came to know that a child that age doesn't have that kind of power. Faye was bound to go with or without help from anyone. Didn't she stand against the man who was bound he'd marry her? He had every one of her family but Lew on his side, too.

I'd think if I hadn't walked down with Momma and Daddy to see the new baby I might never have seen Faye or gotten myself into the middle of something that, for years, could creep up on me and send me into shivers of fright. My nightmares about being chased through thick woods could bring me upright or even straight out of bed. I'd find myself standing in the middle of the room.

I hadn't seen Kitty Thomas since the last day of school. A long time, it seemed to me. Maybe she'd be glad to see me. A simple-minded thought. I was a silent child people seldom noticed, while Kitty made herself the center of things.

None of the other kids wanted to go along that evening, especially to the Thomas house. My sisters didn't like Kitty, and the boys were too old to get excited about going visiting with our parents.


Kitty happened to be in the Crowders' yard. Even though I knew all the kids with her, none of them seemed inclined to call me over, so I went into the Thomas house through the kitchen to the front room. I'd learned that if I found a seat and stayed still I could hear some good talk. It didn't matter that I didn't always understand what I heard. I enjoyed being a spectator.

I slid onto a kitchen chair set conveniently against the wall just inside the doorway. When I saw Faye sitting so quietly on another straight chair, I nearly forgot to listen to Momma and Katie, who was sitting up in bed. The baby in the bassinet set close to the bed didn't interest me at the moment, not when I was being invisible.

Faye had thick shoulder-length auburn hair and skin like an old plate Momma had that you could see the shadow of your hand through. Her cotton dress made me think of someone sitting neck-deep in wildflowers, only the blooms fit close around her.

My dad and Lew were sitting on the front porch. I could see them through the screen door and wondered why they hadn't gone on out onto the grass where their words wouldn't mix with the women's.





Daddy turned to look in at us. I couldn't see his features, but I knew he'd be quiet about seeing me inside on such a lovely evening. His head turned just a little.

Faye had stood up to pour Katie a glass of water, then check on the baby. She took a brush and began brushing Katie's long brown hair. Katie turned her head to let Faye braid her hair and put a rubber band on the end. It was a long time before I saw Daddy's head turn away.

I wondered if Katie was ever jealous of Faye's hair with the reddish lights coming from it. Later, local people would say that anything Maureen O'Hara did our Faye could have done better. She'd have given John Wayne what-for.

Even then, as Faye was doing those simple things, I had the feeling that if I turned around I'd see someone with a camera in the doorway beside me. Faye's hands didn't just do work. They floated from one little job to another, making the simple look artful. Now and then she'd give her head a toss, sending the heavy hair away from her face. When she sat back down so regally on that painted chair, her right hand rested against her chin in a thoughtful manner.

A new voice floated in from the porch. A strange man came inside, pausing as if he too knew the camera was there. When he smiled at them, Momma and Katie seemed to brighten all over. Faye didn't. She sat there, just watching, until he was forced to go to her. I felt as if she'd won something from him and he didn't like it.

I had a sense of loss, of being pushed away from something pleasant. That stranger had taken over. I could still see Faye, but she'd changed. There was something unpleasant about her attitude. If he hadn't held tight to her hand, it would have fallen to her lap. If he was supposed to be her boyfriend, she didn't like him the way Momma did Daddy. Faye didn't have that look that Momma got when Daddy took her hand.

"Faye, I think you oughtta go t' Hollywood an' be in th' movies," came out of me almost before the words were in my head. I think I just wanted us to be back the way we were before that man took over.

I do know it put me where I didn't ever want to be, all the faces like moons shining on me. Worst of all, even the men on the porch had stopped talking. I imagine they were trying to recall what they'd been saying. Momma would wonder how long I'd been there. She knew I'd never tell what I'd heard, but now my eight-year-old



mind might hold something it shouldn't. She had no idea what my mind had already soaked up from my brothers' smuggled-in true crime magazines.

Faye's light laugh made everything else not matter. Because of it I didn't feel the heat from that man's furious glare.

"Go find Kitty," Momma ordered sharply.

Wondering what terrible thing I'd done, I oozed off the chair and out to the back steps. I sat halfway down, exiled from all around me. Even Kitty's little sister Hannah, begging from the bottom step to be allowed into the game of monkey-in-the-middle, kept her back to me.

Behind me, the screen door creaked open and shut. I hunched my shoulders high against my ears. Someone came lightly across the porch and sat down on a higher step. Faye's saddle shoes and white ankle socks came down beside me on my step.

"Don't worry, little Rena. You didn't say anything that hasn't been said." Faye's warm hand pressed at my shoulder. "They just don't like to hear it. Especially Dave Searle."

"He did look like thunder." I lowered my shoulders, but I still didn't look at her. It was easier to talk, not seeing her face.


"He did that." She laughed. There was sunshine in her voice. "I expect he thinks I put you up to it. We'll go round and round about it later when we're by ourselves." I'd been hoping he was mad enough to go home. "He'll say he thought I'd forgotten that silly notion, and I'll say I never forget and it's not silly."

"Why don't you then? Jist say I'm going an' go. That's how my biggest brother went to th' army."

"Oh, I expect there's more to it than that. Besides, for a girl to try to go off . . ." She leaned forward to whisper fiercely in my ear, "I just know I'm not going to have babies and be put out for show in the front room. Don't you settle for that either. Be someone!"

Just then Dave came onto the porch. The steps vibrated with his every movement. The two of them went off for a walk. He'd dressed up for their date in a white shirt with the cuffs turned back just so and pressed trousers. Not that it needed it, but Faye hadn't even neatened her hair.

During the Depression people walked everywhere, but even if we'd had a car, we'd have walked the distance down our road and up the highway to the Thomas house. If it hadn't been for all the trees between, people on the hill could have looked across and down on our place. The creek separated our land from the bottom of the



hillside. Boys could cross back and forth as they wished. Girls had to walk down one road and up the other to get to the same place.

On the walk back through the dark woods, I stayed ahead of Momma and Daddy. I was waiting for Momma to say something about my bad manners. They were so busy talking they didn't even notice I was trying to toss my hair away from my face. It didn't work with hair cut straight just below my earlobes.

Later, when Clara, Nan, Gracie, and I had been told for about the third time to get to sleep, I strung the things I'd heard into a reasonable story. Daddy said he thought Faye should go off if she wanted to, while Momma declared a woman should keep her promises. Especially when a man gave her a ring. Did Faye think she could take the ring and still go off to California? Daddy agreed, no, she shouldn't have taken the ring.

Knowing they'd both come out on the same side, I fell asleep.

Having a big family meant we never had to leave the woods to find playmates. In fact, kids from along the road came looking for us, all but Kitty. She never could play a game without being the leader. In *our* woods, my sisters saw to it that one of them was. Kitty was the one who would have known Faye's plans. For that reason alone I wished Kitty might come with the other girls.

The day Daddy came home from the sawmill and said Faye was still there, I just sat there, keeping still while I waited for more. This time I was on the porch. Momma and Daddy were in the kitchen. Even without seeing his face I could tell Daddy was smiling.

"Faye gave Dave back his ring. He was so mad he threw it across the yard. Kitty has all the kids lookin' for it."

At that time I didn't know of any house that had a telephone, but gossip got around, even to Momma there in the woods. She was never one to go looking for it. "Did you see how Renie kept lookin' at her? Like she *was* straight outa a movie."

"I was outside with Lew. Remember?"

I felt as if the world around me had made a sudden leap. My daddy had told an almost lie.

Momma changed the subject anyhow when she said, "I'm glad I have you." She said that a lot, letting people know how important they were to her.

I went off toward the creek. The other girls were there looking for smooth stones to lay in alongside Momma's houseplants. I got busy

looking, too, but I was wishing I could cross the low water to the hillside beyond.

If one of them found out, Momma would hear about it mighty fast. Then I'd have to promise never to go there alone again. So far she hadn't noticed how often I left the others behind. What did going over there hurt anyhow? I stayed away from the yards on the far side of the trees.

I'd come across Faye's secret place on one of my explorations. I'd nearly walked straight into the little clearing before I realized someone was already there. My heart took a big jump. Faye sat so still facing off to the side. I held my breath until she gave one long sigh.

It would have been so exciting to walk into the open and be welcomed by her. Maybe we could have even talked about Hollywood and the movies. I didn't know much beyond what was in the worn movie magazines Clara got somewhere, but I'd have listened.

Frustrated for once by my own silence, I'd sneaked off.

Now and then, when I could risk it, I went back to Faye's special spot. If the rock was bare, I'd know she'd probably been there not long before. Even in the summertime leaves and twigs fall. I'd make a wish for Faye to be there. At the same time I wished every day for Daddy to say she'd gone off to find fame and fortune.

Then, early in August, after we'd helped Momma can tomatoes the boys had picked, we were turned loose. Somehow we girls had acquired enough pennies to make a trip to the store worthwhile. We started down the road to the highway. Out of sight of the house I handed my pennies to Clara with an order to get me the most for my money. I'd think about the coming scolding later.

I just had to find Faye one more time. Daddy had said she'd made up her mind to go before winter. I decided if I kept whispering, "Be there," the entire walk to her hideaway, she'd be there one last time. I just wanted to say good luck, or maybe see her as a real person before she showed up on the big screen or in a black and white magazine photograph.

She *was* there, but so was *he*, spoiling everything around us.

I heard before I was close enough to see. Their voices weren't loud, but the woods were so still. There was hardly a breeze enough to stir the hot, dusty air.

"I'm sorry, Dave. I told you when you pushed that ring on my finger and got everyone so excited that you wouldn't stop me." She

sounded so hard. "A woman doesn't *belong* to a man just because he says so."

"Gettin' married is what women *do*! Obeying is what women *do*!" Dave's voice scared me. It was so set. I half expected to hear Faye following him off through the underbrush. "You get married and have babies and look after your man's house."

"And he calls you *his woman* or *the woman*. I hate that! Th' Woman! No, thank you."

I'd heard those words, the woman, lots of times, but never from my daddy. He used Momma's name as if it was a special title.

"Listen . . ." he spluttered.

"Dave," Faye's voice became softer, "you're a good man for someone, but . . ." I was hearing a perfectly rehearsed performance. I'd listened to enough voices to know.

"That does it!" His voice got louder. "I'll make you pregnant. Do you think the muckety-mucks in Hollywood will want you then?"

Here was a word I'd never heard, pregnant, but I did understand Faye's sharp cry of pain.

I still don't know how I got through the underbrush. I do know that if I hadn't struck him where I did I'd have merely bounced off him. As it was, my whole body hit him just behind his knees. It's a wonder I didn't break all my bones. When he went over backward, I was pinned under him. Blackness oozed over everything, and I felt as if I'd gone into deep water.

"Renie! Rena, what did you do?" came from so far away. Suddenly something was hauling on my shoulder, and it hurt. I tried to fight myself free of Dave, of the hands. My head was filled with the sounds of ragged panting. I had visions of wild animals gathering close.


Then I was clear of that stupefying lump in such a scrunched up heap I wasn't sure which part of me to move first to unlock the rest of me. Animal fear of that lump got me skittering away from there.

"Did—I—kill—him?"

"He's breathing—better than—I am. What did—you do, Rena? We have to get help!" She took a long breath. "He hit his head on something."

"There's—all kinda rocks under—th' leaves. Come on. If he's breathin'—he'll be okay. Just mad. I don't wanna be here."

Faye didn't fuss about staying to help him, but dragging her out of there was like hauling a walking mummy. She seemed to have



lost all her energy. I wanted to take her home for Momma to look after. Her answer to that didn't make sense.

"I don't think your momma would care for that idea. Don't worry about Dave. He'll come to see what a wrong thing he'd have done. We'll both be safe." She said it the same way I'd been saying, "Be there." A desperate wish.

I waited all night for Dave to come to the house, yelling about that stupid kid.

No one came until the next day. I was being punished for going where I shouldn't have and then falling down the hill to boot. That was my story to cover my hurts and tattered dress. I was too proud to say I ached in every inch of my body. I didn't care that the other girls were turned loose for the day, and Momma didn't care that I'd stretched out on the couch in the living room. Just as long as I wasn't having too good a time.

Sometime during the morning I heard a car coming along the road. Momma nearly broke the screen door getting out to the edge of the porch. Scared silly, I made it to the front window to see if Dave was coming after me. Momma, her hands tucked under her apron, waited for our visitors to come to her. Looking at her so cool and collected you'd think her husband came home every day in the sheriff's car.


Daddy was safe. I was terrified. I had been from the instant my head had begun to clear and I could take in what I'd done. Every noise in the night had made me jump, jerking the bed I shared with Nan until she gave me a good punch. I was *glad* not to be allowed outside the house. After the night I'd had, I was relieved to see the sheriff coming after me, but I suddenly had to go to the outhouse.

By the time I was finished there, Daddy was waiting on the path for me. He picked me up and carried me into the kitchen where he sat me on a chair, then pulled another one close beside me. He never moved away the entire time the sheriff was there.

Around seven thirty the night before the Delaney brothers from up the road had been hiking down along the creek. They'd found Dave Searle's body about fifteen feet from the bank.

Later, after the sheriff had been called, people had told him Dave's car was driven into the underbrush at the top of the hill. It looked as if someone had tried to hide the car.

Sheriff Dole said that for a long time Faye wouldn't answer any questions about Dave. Then, when her brother remarked on why she had come home and put on a sweater on such a stifling day, she



was forced to show them her bruised arms. She told them everything. At the time I didn't understand that. Now I see that by telling the truth she had me to say we'd left him and I saw her start for home.

The sheriff had questioned her at the house, where all the neighbors were hanging around outside. Some of them managed to hear most of his questions. Thanks to them, the story spread and grew.

"Is that what you heard Dave say?" the sheriff asked me. "Before you hit him?"

"I didn't hit him. I knocked him down. I didn't know what he was saying, only that he was hurtin' her." I leaned against Daddy. I could feel his heartbeats against my aching head.

Momma said something I didn't take in. I just went on with my story, rushing it so I wouldn't run out of words before the end. Yes, I did see Faye go off toward the houses, and I came straight home. I didn't say how I'd stumbled into things, or now and then tried to head off sideways. I put my hands between my knees and thought about my bag of penny candy still in the cupboard. Dave was dead. It was safe for me to enjoy my treat.

"If the Delanèys hadn't spotted him from the creek bank . . ."

For the first time I looked straight at the sheriff. His face was like any other man's, not scary at all.

"Where I knocked him over, you couldn't see him from the crick."

"Well, yes, you could." He sounded kind of blustery. "You're a little girl, much shorter than the Delaneys. You couldn't be expected to see as far."

"No. Faye's hidin' place is higher up, an' there was bushes we went through." I didn't turn away from the face that was trying to put me in my place.


"Can you show us, Renie?" My daddy believed me.

"No!" I heard that all right. Momma was taking me away from there. "You men jist go look. Better yet, make Faye show you. It's all her fault anyhow."

For the next couple of weeks, we had more company than I'd ever seen in my life. For a change, Momma was very selective about who she cooked for. I even heard her say, "You'll have to excuse us now. I must feed my children."

Some people never got out of their cars before my brothers or Daddy was sending them off. Meanwhile, my sisters formed a guard around me until we all got bored with that.

I heard things from the boys that helped me work out what hap-



pened after I got Faye away. Dave Searle must have come to and headed for the water. He'd never have gone near the Thomas house for fear Faye had told Lew everything. Whoever found him stumbling around had taken a jagged rock to him. My brothers' description of what was on that rock made me throw up. Years later one of them admitted they hadn't ever seen the rock.

Every man around must have been questioned, his hands looked at for scratches from holding the rock. Working men, their hands were calloused and rough. A few more scratches would hardly stand out. Faye couldn't have known all the men they talked to. I decided Dave didn't charm men the way he did the women.

In our house, at least, life settled back into place. I put my mind to the first day of school. I'd read, or tried to read, everything we had in the house. I was ready for more.

The whole thing was spoiled by the games played at recess and lunchtime. Our school didn't have playground equipment other than a mushy softball and a worn bat. The kids invented new games, variations on the old. That year the boys were interested in Dave's ghost and the Mysterious Murderer. Even my brothers came at me with their stocking caps pulled down to their chins. Finally, after I'd bloodied a Mysterious Murderer's nose, Miss Howard allowed me to stay indoors with her.


For a long time I believed that if I hadn't told Faye she should be a movie star, if I hadn't knocked Dave Searle off his feet, everything would have gone on as usual. I even took blame for every little disagreement my parents had. On the outside our life looked the same. It just didn't feel the same.

It must have been between Thanksgiving and Christmas when Daddy, from his end of the supper table, announced, "Faye Thomas left for California. I guess she had to swear to come back if they ever have a trial, but I expect we'll never see her again."

Always the last to sit down, Momma said, as if we were guests, "I'm glad you're all here tonight. Special dessert." She hadn't forgotten her one boy was away from home. She just didn't talk much about him.

For some months I kept track of every piece of mail that came into the house. It wasn't hard considering how seldom we received any.

I think mostly I wanted something I could show the girls at school. Kitty Thomas lorded it over all of us that *her* aunt was becoming famous. So far, Faye, now Ramsey, had made the entertain-



ment page of the city papers that came on Sunday. Her head showed up among a dozen other heads, all with the same hairdo.

It seemed like a long time before Kitty could broadcast, "My Aunt Faye Ramsey received the entire script from the director himself." She'd never tell me directly, but she made sure I was within hearing distance. My lack of reaction irritated her no end.

I was stuck with that girl until the day we graduated from high school, when Abner Birch left her standing alone to come to my party, a big family picnic in our side yard. He was the only boy of my acquaintance who never asked me to show him where "it happened."

It was twenty years from the time Faye left until the day I got the one and only letter. I had long ago stopped thinking about her as if she were my special person. I had Abner, our children. When Momma died in 1956, we moved in with Daddy. Without her, he had little interest in looking after himself.

That afternoon the two of us were alone when the mailman stopped out front. Daddy loved the new delivery system with the box at the end of the walk and had made bringing in the mail his special job.

When he handed me Faye's letter, it seemed somehow appropriate that I had to put aside my knitting. So many things I did were a continuation of Momma's life, such as sitting in her rocking chair while I knitted mittens.

Curiosity, nothing more, made me take a loose knitting needle to slip under the cream-paper flap and slit it open. Why now, after all these years? I unfolded the heavy paper.

*Dear Little Rena,*

*My protector and biggest booster and I never kept in touch. Are you my biggest fan, too?*

*I want you to be the first to know my news. I'm almost a shoo-in for the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for my work in Jo's Best March. Did you see it? I know Maylon Bradford brings all my films to Birch Mills. There were some in the beginning that he should never have bothered with, especially the women's prison ones. They wrecked my hair for those. Luckily it was back to normal when I got into Technicolor.*

*Did Kitty tell you they tried to change my entire name? I had to fight to keep Faye because they thought there were enough of those. We compromised when I gave in on*



*Thomas. It might have reminded too many people of the Faye Thomas stories in the crime magazines. Producers were always going through those magazines for story ideas. They never actually used our story because there was no real drama. They should have lived through it. Let me tell you, those prison movies were too close to what my life might have been if we both hadn't stuck to our stories.*

What stories? Mine was the truth the whole way.

*Renie, dear, I'll bet all these years you've been patting yourself on the back for giving me the chance to get away from Dave. Honey, I could have lived with anything he did to me, and I'd have gone anyway. Thanks to you, though, someone else had a chance to fix him, and you put me in a spotlight I don't like. I've had to watch everything I do out here. Make the wrong person mad or jealous and they start raking through your past. An unsolved murder would be dynamite for someone.*

*Save me? All you saved me from was the freedom to be a star. If I hadn't had to behave myself, I'd have fought tooth and nail for the part that's going to win Susan Hayward the Best Actress Oscar. Do you see the joke? It's a prison movie.*


*Thanks for nothing.*

*Faye Ramsey*

*By the way, Renie dear, did your daddy ever say where he was the evening Dave was killed? Your daddy did have warm eyes—for a married man.*

Numbed, I sat there in Momma's rocking chair staring at that sprawled handwriting until the words made no sense. It had been so long ago since we'd gone through all that terrible time that I'd outgrown the attacks of fear. Faye, for all her years beyond mine, had made me the scapegoat for the fact that her career hadn't gone the way she'd planned. She thought mentioning my daddy would bring me pain.

"Faye Thomas might be nominated Best Supporting Actress," I said as if Daddy had been waiting to hear. "Do you remember her, Dad?"



"Sure I remember her." He looked at me over his *Farm Journal*. "Our Faye, everyone calls her. She never did belong to anyone but herself. Now my wife . . ." His voice faded, and I thought he'd gone back to his magazine. "Lookin' at Faye Thomas was enough to burn any man's eyes. There was a lot o' us glad when she got t' go."

Very deliberately I slid the letter back into the envelope and then into my knitting book.

Walking away from Daddy's rambling words, I went to the kitchen and began laying out fresh vegetables to make soup for supper. It took both the steady chopping and my off-key singing to cover his words. At that moment I was wishing I couldn't be trusted to keep a secret, but if Daddy felt better for passing the truth to someone else, it didn't matter that I couldn't quite hear everything.

It's so easy now to go back to that day. Sitting in the same rocking chair, holding the letter, is enough. The stationery is so heavy I don't think it will ever wear out, and it's not something I want to leave behind.

Repeating my actions of that day, I tuck the letter between the pages of a knitting book and rise from my chair. My age tells on me as I walk to the kitchen. I stand at the long table chopping imaginary vegetables. I raise my head to hear those long-ago words coming in a steady stream. Nothing disturbs the silence. Not even my chopping. Suddenly aware of how ghostlike my actions are, I stop, putting my hands side by side flat on the table.

The names Daddy gave me that day, did he mean all those men knew who had come across Dave Searle stumbling around in the underbrush? Had it been an accidental meeting, or was there someone besides myself watching Dave mistreat Faye? All the men along the hill worked either at the sawmill or in the coal mine beyond the sawmill.

Which of them didn't work that day? Or had left work early? And how had that many men been able to hold such a dreadful secret inside when each, at one time or another, was threatened with arrest? Were they all so desperate to be free of Faye that they'd protect a murderer?

I have to keep telling myself they were all protecting one man's wife and children. Times were hard, after all.

# Sing and Sing Loud

Dan Crawford

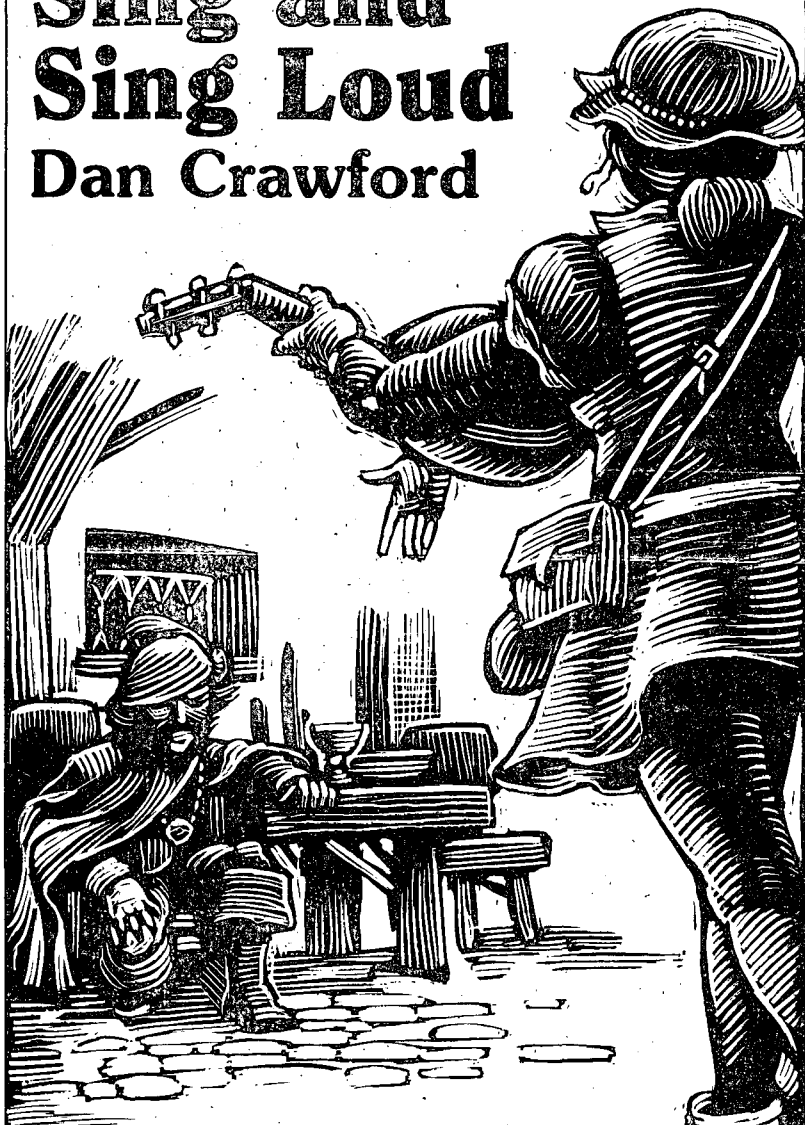


Illustration by Tim Foley

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**I**t was the smallest bar crowd, for this night of the week, that Polijn had ever played for. All she had as audience were the man behind the bar and a grizzled customer probably too drunk to pay. Polijn kept strumming the fidual, though. The barman had already suggested other ways to earn money, but she wasn't that broke yet.

"Talented fingers like that shouldn't be wasted on strings," he called, his voice half a cough. He picked up a goblet from the shelf and started to polish the stem.

"The strings pay better, friend," Polijn replied. She didn't take time to make her tone amiable. She might not be enough of a minstrel to pass muster at the Blank Page, but that didn't reduce her to back-room work at the Long Coat.

It was Polijn's misfortune, though she hadn't known it at the time, to have been the fifth minstrel to arrive in town the same day. Four young men had left town two years earlier to learn minstrelsy at the School and returned now to show off their stuff at the Blank Page. The School, miles to the south, was the oldest institution of learning on the continent and had turned out so many legendary talents that it had never seen a need to lengthen its name.

Let lesser institutions call themselves Schools of Minstrelsy or Universities.

When she found out about this, Polijn knew her chances of making a lot of money were slim, but she was interested nonetheless. The mayor had decreed a friendly competition among the four hometown minstrels, the prize to be a keg of beer. The contest would allow them to show off all the tricks they'd learned and at the same time enhance the town's reputation as a center of culture. What other village this size had four such talents in one generation?

Polijn therefore felt she did have a chance of hearing some pretty good music. This was the product she purveyed, and a study of the competition could be instructive as well as entertaining. Besides, it had been weeks since she'd had a night off.

At the door of the Blank Page, though, "No room, lady," had been her greeting. "We couldn't even promise you a place to stand."

Everyone in town, it seemed, had come to hear their old neighbors sing and play.

"Could they at least use an accompanist?" Polijn had inquired. "Or someone to play a bit after the contest, when they're resting?"

The doorman had no answer

to that. He'd called over the four contestants themselves and had Polijn put her proposition to them. They hadn't taken long over it.

"I don't suppose she's ever been to the School," one minstrel yawned. "She couldn't keep up."

"You can tell by her accent she's from a backward country," noted another.

"And a fidtual, friends!" The third man shook his harp. The harp was of course the highest class of minstrel's tool, while the fidtual was standard at the lower bars and inns. Virtually anyone could make a passable tune with a fidtual.

"Oh, forget her," said the fourth, turning to push back into the inn. "She's only here to see what tricks she can steal from us."

There was that, of course, but Polijn would have preferred to be turned away for that first, without the comments about her shortcomings as a performer. So she had dragged herself back to the Long Coat, a bar nearly empty because of the contest at the Blank Page. The few customers who had been there had cleared out as word of the wonderful singing at the other end of town reached them. Polijn doubted there'd been room for them, either, but the fact that they hadn't returned argued that they felt standing in the

street listening to School-trained minstrels beat hearing her songs.

So she was here with one snoring villager and the bar owner. She strummed her way through "Curls and the World," a grouchy little composition of her own. Polijn's hair was straight.

"When your fingers get tired, friend, there's a flute back here you can play anytime!"

Polijn sneered at him. The barman sneered back, but the grimace ended in a grin. He could wait. The Blank Page was full, and where else could she go to spend the night?

They both turned toward the door at the sound of boots. A tall man stepped through the doorway, looking right and left as if bewildered. On spotting Polijn, he smiled.

"And I thought all the good music was at the other end of town!"

"Come in, friend," called the barman, thumping a metal tankard on the bar. "I do believe she'd prefer a trio."

The customer tossed down a coin without looking at him, caught up the cup, and moved to Polijn's table. "A haunting little tune," he said. "May I sit down?"

Polijn looked him over. An apple-cheeked gentleman with bushy sidewhiskers and loose

brown clothes, he was obviously someone who enjoyed comfort. Perhaps that was why he was bothering with this place; there would be uncomfortable crowding at the Blank Page. A traveler, too, by his boots, and one who had traveled far: those bright eyes had seen much and intended to see everything.

After some reflection, Polijn nodded. A minstrel of her limited marketability could not afford to chase away a customer. She might make some money, and his presence might keep the barman at bay.

Besides, she had just noticed the tendril of smoke rising where his hand rested on the wooden chair.

"Kind of you to let me interrupt when you are no doubt composing a song to change the face of singing for all time." The stranger sat down and blew on the ale in his mug. A wisp of steam rose from the surface. "Perhaps I could buy you a drink?"

"My cup is not yet empty, sir," said Polijn. "Don't bother."

The head bobbed up and down. "I knew you to be shy." One finger pointed at her face. "Oh my socks, yes, I knew it when I saw you here instead of at the great competition."

Polijn in general felt her problems were no one else's business, but she was still irritated

enough to tell him, "I was told that cart needed no fifth wheel."

"You shock me." The man put a hand on his chest. "Well, it's no more than parochialism, I've no doubt. That must be it: they feared that you, an outsider, might threaten the supremacy of local talent."

He tipped his head back, apparently seeing something in the shadows and cobwebs of the ceiling that Polijn didn't. For he said, "This seems a much more worldly establishment. Why don't we have our own singing competition, you and I? I could stake one of my medallions against yours."

Polijn wore the golden medallion given her by a sorcerer so that it didn't show. She was not, however, particularly surprised that this fellow seemed to be able to see it under her tunic. Not completely unaccustomed to dealing with supernatural folk, she extended her fidual toward him.

"I'd be pleased to hear you sing, sir," she said. "Or to sing for you. But I see no need to make a contest of it."

"Oh my socks, she's wise beyond her years!" said the man, applauding a little. "Yes indeed; never rush into battle against someone whose sword you've never seen. But I have a mind to listen to a singing contest. Perhaps you could sing better than

our host?" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the bar.

Polijn could but replied, "I don't believe I need to take your medallion."

The man applauded again. His whiskers flicked back and forth when he did so, almost like sparks above a campfire. "Oh, they *are* quite impractical, aren't they? Just weigh down the neck really. But we could play for more useful stakes. Come, if you win, I shall give you a pair of boots that will never wear out from your walking. If the barman wins, you shall come and play for me in my home. For quite some time."

Polijn did not like his smile, which suggested to her that she would be in equal danger whether she said yes or no. "Who would be judge, then?" she demanded.

"Well now." The man sat back. "It would not be fair for you or me or our host to be judge. And our friend here is not likely to be of much help. But a judge will be available, I think."

"If the judge were to be impartial . . ." Polijn's worn boots were getting thinner with every mile, and, as for the barman's singing, she'd heard it. The frogs in the pond she'd passed on her way to town had a better notion of melody.

"We shall have a panel of

judges, and they shall judge each singer on the singer's merits. Done?"

"Done," said Polijn. If the judge was impartial, she must win, and if she didn't win, the judge could not have been impartial. The stranger did not seem to have left her any way to come in second.

"Well and good!" The man snapped two fingers of his left hand. Polijn blinked. At the end of the blink, a table across the room was occupied. The four men were sharing a joke so good it took them a moment to notice where they were. Polijn recognized the one who had sneered at her fiducial first.

"Gentlemen," said the stranger to the four minstrels, "we require School-trained judges of music. We will not detain you long."

They stared at him. The barman was quicker to recover from surprise. "What in all creation's going on here!" he roared, charging from behind the bar.

"Our first contestant, gentlemen."

A harp that had not been there a second before flew from the stranger's hand. The barman caught it against his chest and fell back against the bar.

He fumbled the instrument between his hands, obviously



not sure which way was up. "I . . ." he began to say.

Then he jerked upright. One hand came across the strings to sound a chord that caught at the ear. "A song," he sang, his voice suddenly a gentle tenor.

Quite a song it was, too. The tune altered in key and tempo as it moved, always in a way that fit the lyrics, which ran to a rhyme scheme both complex and inevitable. His voice floated here and stung there, singing with force but no apparent effort. You had only to keep your eyes away from the twisted face and the blood that began to drip from fingers that were completely unused to harp work. It was a strong song, an urgent song, a song of good and evil, and their eternal struggle, and the outcome still in doubt. It told of singers as soldiers and songs as weapons, brilliant new songs that flashed with genius and innovation, showing all the haunted soul of music.

It went on and on; Polijn found herself hoping it would never end. That so much beautiful music could come out of such a scruffy singer seemed a miracle and a wonder. She felt she was listening to all the songs that had ever mattered, all wound up into one song.

But end it did, on a breathtaking final note. The barman

dropped to the floor, his body heaving.

The main room at the Long Coat was silent except for the snoring of the sleeping guest. Then the founder of the competition, his eyes glowing, turned to Polijn. "Well?" he said. "And you?"

She had lost. She could see that in the way the four minstrelsy students were trying to copy his fingerings on their own harps. Not at all impartial, she still had to admit she had never heard singing like that before. She was pretty sure she never would again.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, if you please!" He snapped his fingers. "We do have another contestant. Ma'am?"

Polijn cranked a couple of opening chords out of the fiducial. She would not go down tongue-tied, at least. It would not be said that she had been afraid or ashamed. She chose a tune by Ulan of Torfal, a classic so old that in most places it was considered the sort of thing music had grown out of long since.

The words were her own, most of them, though she did borrow some of Ulan's. His favorite theme had been singing, and how the job of singing was an occupation not always thrilling or pleasant. Her voice seemed a bit rough, a little hoarse, so she wove that into the lyric, which

was about singing every night and telling stories all day. She sang of long roads and dust and an empty stomach, and not being the best but trying to be passable and entertaining time and time over.

It was, she thought as she finished, both passable and entertaining. And not enough. The judges were listening with interest but with none of the avidity they'd shown for the barman's song. They leaned toward each other across the table, discussing the contest. More than once a hand came up to point at the prone barman. Each time the pointing was followed by a nod of the head.

"You'll like my castle," the stranger remarked.

Polijn doubted it. One of the minstrels struck a chord from the barman's song.

"You will be the center of attention," her companion promised. "I'll enjoy introducing you to all my friends."

He smiled. Polijn knew she would not enjoy meeting all his friends.

His smile wavered as the judges' conference continued. He tapped one forefinger on the table, leaving little black dots.

"Gentlemen?" he inquired.

The four minstrels rose as a group and drew together. Polijn felt not hope but suspicion at the

sight of them bunched together as if in self-defense.

"Sir," said the one with the red beard, "we were given no guidelines on which to base our selection. So we have had to formulate our own."

"Oh my socks, the university mind!" sighed the stranger. "And?"

"And on total life's work," the man said, pulling himself a little straighter, "we award the prize to the woman. The man gave us the finest song we've ever heard, but it's obvious he'll never sing again."

"Well, my socks and shoes!" said the stranger, slapping down a hand that charred the tabletop. Polijn rose and stepped away from the table.

Burning eyes turned toward her. "Sit!" the stranger ordered.

She found herself against the table, her chair coming up hard underneath her. "It's what I deserve for choosing impartial judges," the stranger growled. "Back to school with you; you have learned nothing!"

He snapped his fingers, and the men vanished. "As for you," he said to Polijn, "may you bed with goblins and may they see to it you sing at the top of your lungs all night long."

The room seemed to jump, and then the stranger was gone as well.

Polijn looked left and right for

the minstrels, the stranger, or a magic pair of boots. She saw none of these things, only an old man snoring and a barman whose body had ceased to heave.

She shrugged. It was enough of a prize, she supposed, simply to escape alive. Rising, she turned toward the bar. Instead of going there she fell flat on her face. The fidual bounced across the floor.

Polijn had kept herself very limber, so it took only a few minutes to squeeze, twist, and pry her feet out of the immense shoes of solid lead. Massaging a cramp out of the left foot, she crawled over to pick up her fidual. It was undamaged; it took

rather more than a few bumps to damage a fidual.

Sitting on the floor, she considered the leaden boots. They were worth something, but she doubted they were worth the hauling until she found someone who needed the lead.

She rose and stepped to the bar, taking a detour around the barman. Like most such gentry he kept the till in a bowl under the bar. She emptied it into her pack. It was only fair; whoever inherited the bar would have the boots as well as the story of the singing contest. It wouldn't be the most refined or advanced story, but it was worth a little eating money.

## SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":

The most horse thieves were apprehended in Nebraska and the most cattle rustlers in Colorado. The most prevalent kind of crime for which arrests were made was claim jumping.

| BOUNTY<br>HUNTER      | HORSE<br>THIEVES | CATTLE<br>RUST-<br>LERS | ROBBERS | CLAIM CARD<br>JUMP-<br>ERS | CHEATS |
|-----------------------|------------------|-------------------------|---------|----------------------------|--------|
| O'Hara (Colo.): \$185 | 0                | 2                       | 1       | 1                          | 0      |
| Norris (Colo.): \$165 | 1                | 1                       | 0       | 0                          | 2      |
| Queen (Kan.): \$185   | 2                | 0                       | 1       | 0                          | 1      |
| Ryder (Kan.): \$165   | 0                | 1                       | 1       | 2                          | 0      |
| McNally (Neb.): \$185 | 1                | 1                       | 0       | 2                          | 0      |
| Snyder (Neb.): \$165  | 1                | 0                       | 2       | 0                          | 1      |
| Peters (Neb.): \$155  | 1                | 0                       | 0       | 2                          | 1      |

MYSTERY CLASSIC



# THE INVESTORS

Edgar Wallace

**T**here are eight million people in Greater London, and each one of those eight millions is in theory and practice equal under the law and commonly precious to the community. So that, if one is willfully wronged, another must be punished; and if one dies of premeditated violence, his slayer must hang by the neck until he be dead.

It is rather difficult for the sharpest law-eyes to keep tag of eight million people, at least one million of whom never keep still and are generally unattached to any particular domicile. It is equally difficult to place an odd twenty thousand or so who have domiciles but no human association. These include tramps, aged maiden ladies in affluent circumstances, peripatetic members of the criminal classes, and other friendless individuals.

Sometimes uneasy inquiries come through to headquarters. Mainly they are most timid and deferential. Mr. X has not seen his neighbor, Mr. Y., for a week. No, he doesn't know Mr. Y. Nobody does. A little old man who had no friends and spent his fine days pottering in a garden overlooked by his more gregarious neighbor. And now Mr. Y potters no more. His milk has not been taken in; his blinds are drawn. Comes a sergeant of police and a constable who breaks a window and climbs through, and Mr. Y is dead somewhere—dead of starvation or a fit or suicide. Should this be the case, all is plain sailing. But suppose the house empty and Mr. Y disappeared. Here the situation becomes difficult and delicate.

Miss Elver went away to Switzerland. She was a middle-aged spinster who had the appearance of being comfortably circumstanced. She went away, locked up her house and never came back. Switzerland looked for her; the police of Italy searched north Italy from Domodossola to Montecatini. And the search did not yield a thin-faced maiden lady with a slight squint.

And then Mr. Charles Boyson Middlekirk, an eccentric and overpowering old man who quarreled with his neighbors about their noisy children, he too went away. He told nobody where he was going. He lived alone with his three cats and was not on speaking terms with anybody else. He did not return to his grimy house.

He too was well off and reputedly a miser. So was Mrs. Athbell Marting, a dour widow who lived with her drudge of a niece. This lady was in the habit of disappearing without any preliminary announcement of her intention. The niece was allowed to order from the local tradesmen just sufficient food to keep body and soul to-

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gether, and when Mrs. Marting returned (as she invariably did), the bills were settled with a great deal of grumbling and that was that. It was believed that Mrs. Marting went to Boulogne or to Paris or even to Brussels. But one day she went out and never came back. Six months later her niece advertised for her; she chose the cheapest papers—having an eye to the day of reckoning.

"Queer sort of thing," said the public prosecutor, who had before him the dossiers of four people (three women and a man) who had so vanished in three months.

He frowned, pressed a bell, and Mr. Reeder came in.

Mr. Reeder took the chair that was indicated, looked owlshly over his glasses, and shook his head as though he understood the reason for his summons and denied his understanding in advance.

"What do you make of these disappearances?" asked his chief.

"You cannot make any positive of a negative," said Mr. Reeder carefully. "London is a large place full of strange, mad people who live such—um—commonplace lives that the wonder is that more of them do not disappear in order to do something different from what they are accustomed to doing."

"Have you seen these particulars?"

Mr. Reeder nodded.

"I have copies of them," he said. "Mr. Salter very kindly—"

The public prosecutor rubbed his head in perplexity.

"I see nothing in these cases—nothing in common, I mean. Four is a fairly low average for a big city—"

"Twenty-seven in twelve months," interrupted his detective apologetically.

"Twenty-seven—are you sure?" The great official was astounded.

Mr. Reeder nodded again.

"They were all people with a little money; all were drawing a fairly large income, which was paid to them in banknotes on the first of every month—nineteen of them were, at any rate; I have yet to verify eight—and they were all most reticent as to where their revenues came from. None of them had any personal friends or relatives who were on terms of friendship, except Mrs. Marting. Beyond these points of resemblance there was nothing to connect one with the other."

The prosecutor looked at him sharply, but Mr. Reeder was never sarcastic. Not obviously so, at any rate.

"There is another point which I omitted to mention," he went on. "After their disappearance no further money came for them. It

came for Mrs. Marting when she was away on her jaunts, but it ceased when she went away on her final journey."

"But twenty-seven—are you sure?"

Mr. Reeder reeled off the list, giving name, address, and date of disappearance.

"What do you think has happened to them?"

Mr. Reeder considered for a moment, staring glumly at the carpet.

"I should imagine that they were murdered," he said, almost cheerfully, and the prosecutor half rose from his chair.

"You are in your gayest mood this morning, Mr. Reeder," he said sardonically. "Why on earth should they be murdered?"

Mr. Reeder did not explain. The interview took place in the late afternoon, and he was anxious to be gone, for he had a tacit appointment to meet a young lady of exceeding charm who at five minutes after five would be waiting on the corner of Westminster Bridge and Thames Embankment for the Lee bus.

The sentimental qualities of Mr. Reeder were entirely unknown. There are those who say that his sorrow over those whom fate and ill-fortune brought into his punitive hands was the veriest hypocrisy. There were others who believed that he was genuinely pained to see a fellow-creature sent behind bars through his efforts and evidence.

His housekeeper, who thought he was a woman-hater, told her friends in confidence that he was a complete stranger to the tender emotions which enlighten and glorify humanity. In the ten years which she had sacrificed to his service he had displayed neither emotion nor tenderness except to inquire whether her sciatica was better or to express a wish that she should take a holiday by the sea. She was a woman beyond middle age, but there is no period of life wherein a woman gives up hoping for the best. Though the most perfect of servants in all respects, she secretly despised him, called him, to her intimates, a frump, and suspected him of living apart from an ill-treated wife. This lady was a widow (as she had told him when he first engaged her), and she had seen better—far better—days.

Her visible attitude towards Mr. Reeder was one of respect and awe. She excused the queer character of his callers and his low acquaintances. She forgave him his old fashioned shoes and his aged bowler, and even admired the ready-made tie he wore and which was fastened behind the collar with a little buckle, the prongs of



which invariably punctured his fingers when he fastened it. But there is a limit to all hero worship, and when she discovered that Mr. Reeder was in the habit of waiting to escort a young lady to town every day, and frequently found it convenient to escort her home, the limit was reached.

Mrs. Hambleton told her friends—and they agreed—that there was no fool like an old fool, and that marriages between the old and the young invariably end in the divorce court (December v. May and July). She used to leave copies of a favorite Sunday newspaper on his table, where he could not fail to see the flaring headlines:

OLD MAN'S WEDDING ROMANCE  
WIFE'S DECEIT BRINGS GREY HAIR IN SORROW  
TO THE LAW COURTS

Whether Mr. Reeder perused these human documents she did not know. He never referred to the tragedies of ill-assorted unions and went on meeting Miss Belman every morning at nine o'clock, and at five five in the afternoons whenever his work permitted.

He so rarely discussed his own business or introduced the subject that was exercising his mind that it was remarkable he should make even an oblique reference to his work. Possibly he would not have done so if Miss Margaret Belman had not introduced (unwillingly) a leader of conversation which traced indirectly to the disappearances.

They had been talking of holidays: Margaret was going to Cromer for a fortnight.

"I shall leave on the second. My monthly dividends—doesn't that sound grand?—are due on the first—"

"What!"

Reeder turned in surprise. Dividends in most companies are paid at half-yearly intervals.

"Dividends, Miss Margaret?"

She flushed a little at his surprise and then laughed.

"You didn't realize that I was a woman of property?" she teased him. "I receive ten pounds a month—my father left me a small country cottage. I sold it two years ago for a thousand pounds and found a wonderful investment."

Mr. Reeder made a rapid calculation.

"You are drawing something like twelve and a half percent," he

said. "That is indeed a wonderful investment. What is the name of the company?"

She hesitated.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that. You see—well, it's rather secret. It's to do with a South American syndicate that supplies arms to—what do you call them—insurgents! I know it's rather dreadful to make money that way—I mean out of arms and things—but it pays terribly well, and I can't afford to miss the opportunity."

Reeder frowned.

"But why is it such a terrible secret?" he asked. "Quite a number of respectable people make money out of armament concerns."

Again she showed reluctance to explain her meaning.

"We are pledged—the shareholders, I mean—not to divulge our connection with the company," she said. "That is one of the agreements I had to sign. And the money comes regularly. I have had nearly three hundred pounds of my thousand back in dividends already."

"Humph!" said Mr. Reeder, wise enough not to press his question. There was another day tomorrow.

But the opportunity to which he looked forward on the following morning was denied to him. Somebody played a grim "joke" on him—the kind of joke to which he was accustomed, for there were men who had good reason to hate him, and never a year passed but one or the other sought to repay him for his unkindly attentions.

"Your name's Reeder, ain't it?"

Mr. Reeder, tightly grasping his umbrella with both hands, looked over his glasses at the shabby man who stood at the bottom of the steps. He was on the point of leaving his house in the Brockley Road for his office in Whitehall, and since he was a methodical man and worked to a timetable, he resented in his mild way this interruption which had already cost him fifteen seconds of valuable time.

"You're the fellow who shopped Ike Walker, ain't you?"

Mr. Reeder had indeed "shopped" many men. He was by profession a shopper, which, translated from the argot, means a man who procures the arrest of an evildoer. Ike Walker he knew very well indeed. He was a clever, a too clever, forger of bills of exchange and was at that precise moment almost permanently employed as orderly in the convict prison at Dartmoor and might account himself fortunate if he held this easy job for the rest of his twelve years' sentence.

His interrogator was a little hard-faced man wearing a suit that had evidently been originally intended for somebody of greater girth and more commanding height. His trousers were turned up noticeably; his coat was full of folds and tucks which only an amateur tailor would have dared, and only one superior to the criticism of his fellows would have worn. His hard, bright eyes were fixed on Mr. Reeder, but there was no menace in them so far as the detective could read.

"Yes, I was instrumental in arresting Ike Walker," said Mr. Reeder almost gently.

The man put his hand in his pocket and brought out a crumpled packet enclosed in green oiled silk. Mr. Reeder unfolded the covering and found a soiled and crumpled envelope.

"That's from Ike," said the man. "He sent it out of stir by a gent who was discharged yesterday."

Mr. Reeder was not shocked by this revelation. He knew that prison rules were made to be broken, and that worse things have happened in the best regulated jails than this item of a smuggled letter. He opened the envelope, keeping his eyes on the man's face, took out the crumpled sheet, and read the five or six lines of writing.

*Dear Reeder—*

*Here is a bit of a riddle for you.*

*What other people have got, you can have. I haven't got it, but it's coming to you. It's red-hot when you get it, but you're cold when it goes away.*

*Your loving friend,  
Ike Walker*

*(doing a twelve stretch because you went on the witness stand and told a lot of lies)*

Mr. Reeder looked up, and their eyes met.

"Your friend is a little mad, one thinks?" he asked politely.

"He ain't a friend of mine. A gent asked me to bring it," said the messenger.

"On the contrary," said Mr. Reeder pleasantly, "he gave it to you in Dartmoor Prison yesterday when you were released. Your name is Mills; you have eight convictions for burglary and will have your ninth before the year is out."

The man was for the moment alarmed and in two minds to bolt.

Mr. Reeder glanced along Brockley Road, saw a slim figure, that was standing at the corner, cross to a waiting bus, and, seeing his opportunity vanish, readjusted his timetable.

"Come inside, Mr. Mills."

"I don't want to come inside," said Mr. Mills, now thoroughly agitated. "He asked me to give this to you, and I've give it. There's nothing else—"

Mr. Reeder crooked his finger.

"Come, birdie!" he said with great amiability. "And please don't annoy me! I am quite capable of sending you back to your friend Mr. Walker. I am really a most unpleasant man if I am upset."

The messenger followed meekly, wiped his shoes with great vigor on the mat, and tiptoed up the carpeted stairs to the big study where Mr. Reeder did most of his thinking.

"Sit down, Mills."

With his own hands Mr. Reeder placed a chair for his uncomfortable visitor, and then, seating himself at his big writing table, he spread the letter before him, adjusted his glasses, and read, his lips moving, and then leaned back in his chair.

"I give it up," he said. "Read me this riddle."

"I don't know what's in the letter—" began the man.

"Read me this riddle."

As he handed the letter across the table, the man betrayed himself, for he rose and pushed back his chair with a startled, horrified expression that told Mr. Reeder quite a lot. He laid the letter down on his desk, took a large tumbler from the sideboard, inverted it, and covered the scrawled paper. Then:

"Wait," he said, "and don't move till I come back."

And there was an unaccustomed venom in his tone that made the visitor shudder.

Reeder passed out of the room to the bathroom, pulled up his sleeves with a quick jerk of his arm, and, turning the faucet, let hot water run over his hands before he reached for a small bottle on a shelf, poured a liberal portion into the water, and let his hands soak. This done, for three minutes he scrubbed his fingers with a nailbrush, dried them, and, removing his coat and waistcoat carefully, hung them over the edge of the bath. He went back to his uncomfortable guest in his shirtsleeves.

"Our friend Walker is employed in the hospital?" he stated rather than asked. "What have you had there—smallpox or something worse?"

He glanced down at the letter under the glass.

"Smallpox, of course," he said, "and the letter has been systematically infected. Walker is almost clever."

The wood of a fire was laid in the grate. He carried the letter and the blotting-paper to the hearth, lit the kindling, and thrust paper and letter into the flames.

"Almost clever," he said musingly. "Of course, he is one of the orderlies in the hospital. It was smallpox, I think you said?"

The gaping man nodded.

"Of a virulent type, of course. How very fascinating!"

He thrust his hands in his pockets and looked down benevolently at the wretched emissary of the vengeful Walker.

"You may go now, Mills," he said gently. "I rather think that you are infected. That ridiculous piece of oiled silk is quite inadequate—which means 'quite useless'—as a protection against wandering germs. You will have smallpox in three days and will probably be dead at the end of the week. I will send you a wreath."

He opened the door, pointed to the stairway, and the man slunk out.

Mr. Reeder watched him through the window, saw him cross the street and disappear round the corner into the Lewisham High Road, and then, going up to his bedroom, he put on a newer jacket and waistcoat, and went forth to his labors.

He did not expect to meet Mr. Mills again, never dreaming that the gentleman from Dartmoor was planning a "bust" which would bring them again into contact. For Mr. Reeder the incident was closed.

That day news of another disappearance had come through from police headquarters, and Mr. Reeder was waiting at ten minutes before five at the rendezvous for the girl who, he instinctively knew, could give him a thread of the clue. He was determined that this time his inquiries should bear fruit, but it was not until they had reached the end of Brockley Road and he was walking slowly up towards the girl's boardinghouse that she gave him a hint.

"Why are you so persistent, Mr. Reeder?" she asked, a little impatiently. "Do you wish to invest money? Because, if you do, I'm sorry I can't help you. That is another agreement we made, that we wouldn't introduce new shareholders."

Mr. Reeder stopped, took off his hat, and rubbed the back of his head (his housekeeper, watching him from an upper window, was perfectly certain that he was proposing and had been rejected).

"I am going to tell you something, Miss Belman, and I hope—er—that I shall not alarm you."

And very briefly he told the story of the disappearances and the queer coincidence which marked every case—the receipt of a dividend on the first of every month. As he proceeded, the color left the girl's face.

"You're serious, of course?" she said. "You wouldn't tell me that unless—The company is the Mexico City Investment Syndicate. They have offices in Portugal Street."

"How did you come to hear of them?" asked Mr. Reeder.

"I had a letter from their manager, Mr. De Silvo. He told me that a friend had mentioned my name, and gave full particulars of the investment."

"Have you kept the letter?"

She shook her head.

"No; I was particularly asked to bring it with me when I went to see them. Although, in point of fact, I never did see them," smiled the girl. "I wrote to their lawyers—will you wait? I have their letter."

Mr. Reeder waited at the gate whilst the girl went into the house and returned presently with a small portfolio from which she took a quarto sheet. It was headed with the name of a legal firm, Bracher & Bracher, and was the usual formal type of letter one expects from a lawyer.

*Dear Madam [it ran],*

*Re Mexico City Investment Syndicate: We act as lawyers to this syndicate, and so far as we know it is a reputable concern. We feel that it is only due to us that we should say that we do not advise investments in any concern which offers such large profits, for usually there is a corresponding risk. We know, however, that this syndicate has paid 12 1/2 percent, and sometimes as much as 20 percent, and we have had no complaints about them. We cannot, of course, as lawyers, guarantee the financial soundness of any of our clients, and can only repeat that, in so far as we have been able to ascertain, the syndicate conducts a genuine business and enjoys a very sound financial backing.*

*Yours faithfully,*  
**BRACHER & BRACHER**

"You say you never saw De Silvo?"

She shook her head.

"No, I saw Mr. Bracher, but when I went to the office of the syndicate, which is in the same building, I found only a clerk in attendance. Mr. De Silvo had been called out of town. I had to leave the letter because the lower portion was an application for shares in the syndicate. The capital could be withdrawn at three days' notice, and I must say that this last clause decided me; and when I had a letter from Mr. De Silvo accepting my investment, I sent him the money."

Mr. Reeder nodded.

"And you've received your dividends regularly ever since?" he said.

"Every month," said the girl triumphantly. "And really I think you're wrong in connecting the company with these disappearances."

Mr. Reeder did not reply. The following afternoon he made it his business to call at 179 Portugal Street. It was a two story building of an old fashioned type. A wide flagged hall led into the building; a set of old fashioned stairs ran up to the top floor, which was occupied by a china merchant; and from the hall led three doors. That on the left bore the legend BRACHER & BRACHER, SOLICITORS, and immediately facing was the office of the Mexican Syndicate. At the far end of the passage was a door which exhibited the name JOHN BASTON, but as to Mr. Baston's business there was no indication.

Mr. Reeder knocked gently at the door of the syndicate, and a voice bade him come in. A young man, wearing glasses, was sitting at a desk; from a stethoscope headset, wires led to a machine on the table, and he was typing rapidly.

"No, sir, Mr. De Silvo is not in. He only comes in about twice a week," said the clerk. "Will you give me your name?"

"It is not important," said Reeder gently and went out, closing the door behind him.

He was more fortunate in his call upon Bracher & Bracher, for Mr. Joseph Bracher was in his office: a tall, florid gentleman who wore a large rose in his buttonhole. The firm of Bracher & Bracher was evidently a prosperous one, for there were half a dozen clerks in the outer office and Mr. Bracher's private sanctum, with its big partner desk, was a model of shabby comfort.

"Sit down, Mr. Reeder," said the lawyer, glancing at the card.



In a few words Mr. Reeder stated his business, and Mr. Bracher smiled.

"It is fortunate you came today," he said. "If it were tomorrow we should not be able to give you any information. The truth is, we have had to ask Mr. De Silvo to find other lawyers. No, no, there is nothing wrong, except that they constantly refer their clients to us, and we feel that we are becoming in the nature of sponsors for their clients and that, of course, is very undesirable."

"Have you a record of the people who have written to you from time to time asking your advice?"

Mr. Bracher shook his head.

"It is a curious thing to confess, but we haven't," he said; "and that is one of the reasons why we have decided to give up this client. Three weeks ago, the file in which we kept copies of all letters sent to people who applied for a reference most unaccountably disappeared. It was put in the safe overnight, and in the morning, although there was no sign of tampering with the lock, it had vanished. The circumstances were so mysterious, and my brother and I were so deeply concerned, that we applied to the syndicate to give us a list of their clients, and that request was never complied with."

Mr. Reeder sought inspiration in the ceiling.

"Who is John Baston?" he asked, and the lawyer laughed.

"There again I am ignorant. I believe he is a very wealthy financier, but so far as I know, he only comes to his office for three months in the year, and I have never seen him."

Mr. Reeder offered him his flabby hand and walked back along Portugal Street, his chin on his chest, his hands behind him dragging his umbrella, so that he bore a ludicrous resemblance to some strange tailed animal.

That night he waited again for the girl, but she did not appear, and although he remained at the rendezvous until half past five, he did not see her. This was not very unusual, for sometimes she had to work late, and he went home without any feeling of apprehension. He finished his own frugal dinner and then walked across to the boardinghouse. Miss Belman had not arrived, the landlady told him, and he returned to his study and telephoned first to the office where she was employed and then to the private address of her employer.

"She left at half past four," was the surprising news. "Somebody telephoned to her, and she asked me if she might go early."

"Oh!" said Mr. Reeder blankly.

He did not go to bed that night, but sat up in a small room at Scotland Yard, reading the brief reports which came in from the various divisions. And with the morning came the sickening realization that Margaret Belman's name must be added to those who had disappeared in such extraordinary circumstances.

He dozed in the big Windsor chair. At eight o'clock he returned to his own house and shaved and bathed, and when the public prosecutor arrived at his office, he found Mr. Reeder waiting for him in the corridor. It was a changed Mr. Reeder, and the change was not due entirely to lack of sleep. His voice was sharper; he had lost some of that atmosphere of apology which usually enveloped him.

In a few words he told of Margaret Belman's disappearance.

"Do you connect De Silvo with this?" asked his chief.

"Yes, I think I do," said the other quietly, and then: "There is only one hope, and it is a very slender one—a very slender one indeed!"

He did not tell the public prosecutor in what that hope consisted, but walked down to the offices of the Mexican Syndicate.

Mr. De Silvo was not in. Reeder would have been greatly surprised if he had been. He crossed the hallway to see the lawyer, and this time he found Mr. Ernest Bracher present with his brother.

When Reeder spoke to the point, it was very much to the point.

"I am leaving a police officer in Portugal Street to arrest De Silvo the moment he puts in an appearance. I feel that you, as his lawyers, should know this," he said.

"But why on earth—" began Mr. Bracher in a tone of astonishment.

"I don't know what charge I shall bring against him, but it will certainly be a very serious one," said Reeder. "For the moment I have not confided to Scotland Yard the basis for my suspicions, but your client has got to tell a very plausible story and produce indisputable proof of his innocence to have any hope of escape."

"I am quite in the dark," said the lawyer, mystified. "What has he been doing? Is his syndicate a fraud?"

"I know of nothing more fraudulent," said the other shortly. "Tomorrow I intend obtaining the necessary authority to search his papers and to search the room and papers of Mr. John Baston. I have an idea that I shall find something in that room of considerable interest to me."

It was eight o'clock that night before he left Scotland Yard, and he was turning towards the familiar corner when he saw a car come

from Westminster Bridge towards Scotland Yard. Somebody leaned out of the window and signaled him, and the car turned. It was driven by Mr. Joseph Bracher.

"We've found De Silvo," he said breathlessly as he brought the car to a standstill at the curb and jumped out.

He was very agitated, and his face was pale. Mr. Reeder could have sworn that his teeth were chattering.

"There's something wrong—very badly wrong," he went on. "My brother has been trying to get the truth from him—my God! If he has done these terrible things I shall never forgive myself."

"Where is he?" asked Mr. Reeder.

"He came just before dinner to our house at Dulwich. My brother and I are bachelors and we live there alone now, and he has been to dinner before. My brother questioned him, and he made certain admissions which are almost incredible. The man must be mad."

"What did he say?"

"I can't tell you. Ernest is detaining him until you come."

Mr. Reeder stepped into the car, and in a few minutes they were flying across Westminster Bridge towards Camberwell. Lane House, an old fashioned Georgian residence, lay at the end of a road which was, he found, a cul-de-sac. The house stood in grounds of considerable size, he noted as they passed up the drive and stopped before the porch. Mr. Bracher alighted and opened the door, and Reeder passed into a well-furnished hall. One door was ajar.

"Is that Mr. Reeder?" He recognized the voice of Ernest Bracher and walked into the room.

The younger Mr. Bracher was standing with his back to the empty fireplace; there was nobody else in the room.

"De Silvo's gone upstairs to lie down," explained the lawyer. "This is a dreadful business, Mr. Reeder."

He held out his hand, and Reeder crossed the room to take it. As he put his foot on the square Persian rug before the fireplace, he realized his danger and tried to spring back, but his balance was lost. He felt himself falling through the cavity which the carpet hid, lashed out and caught for a moment the edge of the trap, but as the lawyer came round and raised his foot to stamp upon the clutching fingers, Reeder released his hold and dropped.

The shock of the fall took away his breath, and for a second he sprawled, half lying, half sitting, on the floor of the cellar into which he had fallen. Looking up, he saw the older of the two lean-

ing over. The square aperture was diminishing in size. There was evidently a sliding panel which covered the hole in normal times.

"We'll deal with you later, Reeder," said Joseph Bracher with a smile. "We've had quite a lot of clever people here—"

Something cracked in the cellar. The bullet seared the lawyer's cheek, smashed a glass chandelier to fragments, and he stepped back with a yell of fear. In another second the trap was closed, and Reeder was alone in a small brick-lined cellar. Not entirely alone, for the automatic he held in his hand was a very pleasant companion in that moment of crisis.

From his hip pocket he took a flat torch, switched it on, and surveyed his prison. The walls and floor were damp; that was the first thing he noticed. In one corner was a small flight of brick steps leading to a locked steel door, and then:

"Mr. Reeder."

He spun round and turned his light upon the speaker. It was Margaret Belman, who had risen from a heap of sacks where she had been sleeping.

"I'm afraid I've got you into very bad trouble," she said, and he marveled at her calm.

"How long have you been here?"

"Since last night," she answered. "Mr. Bracher telephoned me to see him, and he picked me up in his car. They kept me in the other room until tonight, but an hour ago they brought me here."

"Which is the other room?"

She pointed to the steel door. She offered no further details of her capture, and it was not a moment to discuss their misfortune. Reeder went up the steps and tried the door; it was fastened from the other side and opened inward, he discovered. There was no sign of a keyhole. He asked her where the door led, and she told him that it was to an underground kitchen and coal cellar. She had hoped to escape because only a barred window stood between her and freedom in the little room where she was kept.

"But the window was very thick," she said, "and of course I could do nothing with the bars."

Reeder made another inspection of the cellar, then sent the light of his torch up at the ceiling. He saw nothing there except a steel pulley fastened to a beam that crossed the entire width of the cellar.

"Now what on earth is he going to do?" he asked thoughtfully, and as though his enemies had heard the question and were deter-

mined to leave him in no doubt as to their plans, there came the sound of gurgling water and in a second he was ankle-deep.

He put the light onto the place whence the water was coming. There were three circular holes in the wall, from each of which was gushing a solid stream.

"What is it?" she asked in a terrified whisper.

"Get onto the steps and stay there," he ordered peremptorily, and made investigation to see if it was possible to staunch the flow. He saw at a glance that this was impossible. And now the mystery of the disappearances was a mystery no longer.

The water came up with incredible rapidity, first to his knees, then to his thighs, and he joined her on the steps.

There was no possible escape for them. He guessed the water would come up only so far as would make it impossible for them to reach the beam across the roof or the pulley, the dreadful purpose of which he could guess. The dead must be got out of this charnel house in some way or other. Strong swimmer as he was, he knew that in the hours ahead it would be impossible to keep afloat.

He took off his coat and waistcoat and removed his tie.

"You had better take off your skirt," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone. "Can you swim?"

"Yes," she answered in a low voice.

He did not ask her the real question which was in his mind: for how long could she swim?

There was a long silence; the water crept higher; and then:

"Are you very much afraid?" he asked, and took her hand in his.

"No, I don't think I am," she said. "It's wonderful having you with me—why are they doing this?"

He said nothing but carried the soft hand to his lips and kissed it.

The water was now reaching the top step. Reeder stood with his back to the iron door, waiting. And then he felt something touch the door from the other side. There was a faint click, as though a bolt had been slipped back. He put her gently aside and held his palms to the door. There was no doubt now: somebody was fumbling on the other side. He went down a step, and presently he felt the door yield and come towards him, and there was a momentary gleam of light. In another second he had wrenched the door open and sprung through.

"Hands up!"

Whoever it was had dropped his torch, and now Mr. Reeder focused the light of his own torch and nearly dropped.

For the man in the passage was Mills, the ex-convict who had brought the tainted letter from Dartmoor!

"All right, guv'nor, it's a cop," growled the man.

And then the whole explanation flashed upon the detective. In an instant he had gripped the girl by the hand and dragged her through the narrow passage, into which the water was now steadily overrunning.

"Which way did you get in, Mills?" he demanded authoritatively.

"Through the window."

"Show me—quickly!"

The convict led the way to what was evidently the window through which the girl had looked with such longing. The bars had been removed; the window sash itself lifted from its rusty hinges; and in another second the three were standing on the grass, with the stars twinkling above them.

"Mills," said Mr. Reeder, and his voice shook, "you came here to 'bust' this house."

"That's right," growled Mills. "I tell you it's a cop. I'm not going to give you any trouble."

"Skip!" hissed Mr. Reeder. "And skip fast! Now, young lady, we'll go for a little walk."

A few seconds later a patrolling constable was smitten dumb by the apparition of a middle-aged man in shirt and trousers and a lady who was inadequately attired in a petticoat.

"The Mexican company was Bracher & Bracher," explained Reeder to his chief. "There was no John Baston. His room was a passageway by which the Brachers could get from one room to the other. The clerk in the Mexican Syndicate's office was, of course, blind; I spotted that the moment I saw him. There are a number of blind typists employed in the City of London. A blind clerk was necessary if the identity of De Silvo with the Brachers was to be kept a secret.

"Bracher & Bracher had been going badly for years. It will probably be found that they have made away with clients' money, and they hit upon this scheme of inducing foolish investors to put money into their syndicate on the promise of large dividends. Their victims were well chosen, and Joseph—who was the brains of the organization—conducted the most rigorous investigation to make sure that these unfortunate people had no intimate friends. If they had any suspicion about an applicant, Brachers would write a letter deprecating the idea of an investment and suggesting that the

too-shrewd dupe should find another and a safer method than the Mexican syndicate afforded.

"After they had paid one or two years' dividends, the wretched investor was lured to the house at Dulwich and there scientifically killed. You will probably find an unofficial cemetery in their grounds. So far as I can make out, they have stolen over a hundred and twenty thousand pounds in the past two years by this method."

"It is incredible," said the prosecutor, "incredible!"

Mr. Reeder shrugged.

"Is there anything more incredible than the Burke and Hare murders? There are Burkes and Hares in every branch of society and in every period of history."

"Why did they delay their execution of Miss Belman?"

Mr. Reeder coughed.

"They wanted to make a clean sweep, but they did not wish to kill her until they had me in their hands. I rather suspect—" he coughed again "—that they thought I had an especial interest in the young lady."

"And have you?" asked the public prosecutor.

Mr. Reeder did not reply.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**F**ans of Barbara Vine and Minette Walters will appreciate British author Joanna Hines's **The Fifth Secret** (Carroll & Graf, \$21), a quietly compelling novel of psychological suspense. Jane Baer's life has left her cranky and morose now that she's in her thirties. Her memories of childhood evoke golden days in the circle of her idolized brother and their three closest friends: the beautiful Esme, the now-successful Rob, and the boyish version of Jane's own husband Owen, from whom she's become emotionally estranged. Suddenly Jane learns of the attempted murder of Esme, and then receives a call from Rob: a plea for help irresistibly phrased in their secret childhood code. Jane turns her back on her husband and two children and rushes back to Berkshire at Rob's request. What she doesn't suspect is that she has undertaken a journey directly into the heart of everyone's childhood secrets—including her beloved dead brother's and even her own.

**In the Presence of the Enemy** is Elizabeth George's eighth book in a series that has attracted legions of readers. Her books feature a "family" of characters with Thomas Lynley and Barbara Havers of Scotland Yard at their center. True to George's tradition, this is a big book with lots of drama and the exploration of relationships, a delight only to readers who find the central characters and their personal issues compelling. This time out the emotional whirlwinds surround the abduction of a schoolgirl and a plot to blackmail a powerful liberal London newspaper editor and an equally powerful conservative M.P. Fans who follow the series particularly for the quirky Havers are in for a new view of the sidekick. (Bantam, \$21.95)

**The Risk of Murder** by Bob Berger (Dell, \$4.99) is a lightheart-



ed, lightweight mystery featuring amateur detective James Denny. Denny is a Walter Mittyish bachelor who has made a career out of calculating the odds—or risks—involved in almost any activity. In addition to his syndicated column penned under the name “Dr. Risk,” Denny works freelance (usually via e-mail) for insurance companies and their ilk as a researcher, an expert in what he terms “risk science.” It takes a plea for help from a beautiful young woman for Denny to take any personal risks, but she makes him an offer he can’t refuse: to play hardnosed gumshoe and super sleuth. Odds are that if you don’t examine the plot too closely, you’ll enjoy sharing Denny’s fantasy life with his latest case.

Edgar Award-winning author William L. DeAndrea’s **Killed in Fringe Time** delivers more late-night fun than Letterman and his entire gang. Cobb is his TV network’s youngest vice-president in charge of special projects: translated from media-speak, Cobb is their troubleshooter. To date, he’s happily managed to avoid one of their biggest trouble spots—the late-night talk show war zone and their hot new host, comic Richard Bentyne, a loose cannon who will win the fringe-time war, or so the network is gambling to the tune of forty-five million dollars. Someone close to him, however, seems to find the idea of Bentyne’s death an even bigger riot. This seventh episode in the Matt Cobb series is as witty and clever as its hero. (Simon & Schuster, \$21)

For her canvas in **Night Sins** (Bantam, \$5.99) Tami Hoag has created the small rural Minnesota community of Deer Lake and brilliantly rendered it in careful detail. Deer Lake is a major character in this suspense novel, the kind of town where everyone knows everyone else’s business and residents rarely lock their doors—until one frigid winter night when young Josh Kirkwood is abducted, a chilling and enigmatic note left in his place. The resulting terror is clearly a sick game to one or more evil geniuses whom Deer Lake has been innocently harboring. The authorities look at the child’s family; parents look fearfully at their own children; and everyone begins looking suspiciously at his neighbor—none of which leads to the dark and secret place where Josh is being kept. Using a large cast of characters, Hoag painstakingly takes readers through the authorities’ procedures as they search for the child. A budding romance, the family’s heartache, and further levels of the psychopath’s “game” turn up the burner to a pot-boiling heat. There is a resolution, but it is only in the final pages of the sequel, **Guilty as Sin** (Bantam, \$21.95), that the whole story is told. Although

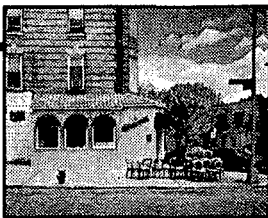
Hoag's premise is one ripped from today's headlines, her rendering makes this two-book thriller exclusively her own.

Rosemary Edghill's **Book of Moons** (Forge, \$20.95) is the second in this fresh series featuring Bast (a.k.a. Karen Hightower): New Yorker, graphic artist, amateur sleuth, and—let's not forget—witch. Bast is smart, sassy, and level-headed, often playing the straight woman to the members of her coven and the wider occult community. Bast is an entertaining and informative tour guide to this world, and Edghill's plot, which takes us further into the heart of modern-day witchcraft beliefs and practices, revolves around the disappearance of special journals, each called a Book of Shadows. An extra bonus is the discussion (and more!) of a long-dead Scottish queen with her own cult following, which makes this a treat for lovers of historical mysteries as well.

Barbara D'Amato continues her superior series starring journalist Cat Marsala with **Hard Christmas** (Scribner, \$20). It offers a thought-provoking look at the struggles of small family-held agrarian businesses, struggles that can turn into life or death tragedies. It's Thanksgiving, and Cat has been invited to stay with the DeGraaf family to research a story on Christmas tree growers. This is God-fearing Dutch country near the east shore of Lake Michigan, and at first glance the DeGraafs appear stereotypical. Since the death in the spring of her husband, Grandmother now owns the old house and the land and still does all the cooking for the family, farmhouse-style. The adult children have other jobs in town but return with the grandkids to plant, and then again to harvest, the trees. An ugly murder reveals a sad picture for the future. The land that has been family-owned for generations has been appraised for development at an appalling price. When Grandmother dies, her children will either face impossible inheritance taxes or they'll be forced to sell quickly, probably well below market price. D'Amato gives us the canny and sympathetic Cat and a family of strong characters to underscore a mesmerizing tale of family pride that twists itself into murderous fanaticism.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The Mid-December Mystery was won by Don Porter of Hills Estates, California; John F. Besnard of Irvine, California; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; A. E. Wales of Hurst, Texas; and Susan Muller of Woodside, New York.



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## THE ENTREPRENEUR by Don Porter

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"Did you have to quit your job? Couldn't you just take a few days off and go check it out?"

"What's to check? 'Corner location, quiet shady spot near other restaurants, and fire protection.' I'm fed up with penny-ante jobs and the rat race. We own our own business, honey; we're going to be rich."

"But you don't even know the guy."

"Hey, do you think I'm stupid? I checked him out. He's a big Florida realtor. You can trust guys like that."

"Take the next exit and turn left. It should be just a few blocks."

"Boy, I'm excited. I can hardly wait to see it."

"Well, I'm sorry we had to sell the house. I loved that place, you know."

"That dump? In a few months we'll be buying a mansion. This is big business, honey. I saw the actual figures. Over a thousand people go through every day. He guaranteed it."

"I still wish you hadn't done it. Investing our life savings in a restaurant."

"It's not a restaurant, honey, it's a sidewalk cafe. They're really chic right now."

"But you haven't even seen it yet. How can you be sure it's such a good deal?"

"Don't worry about it, honey, just let me take care of it. Men understand these things. See, we're absolutely protected by an ironclad guarantee. It says right in the contract that it seats sixteen people. If it doesn't we get our money back."

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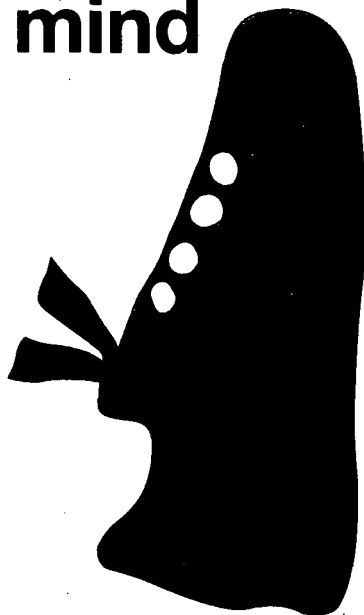
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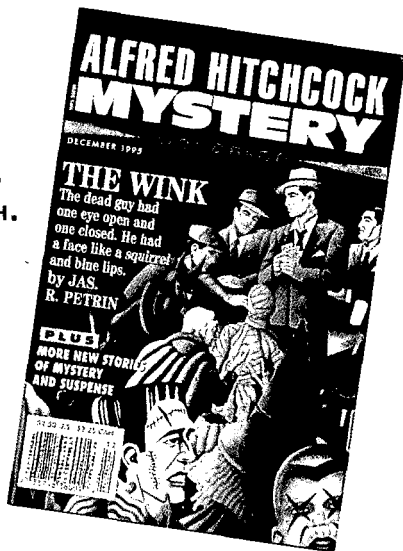
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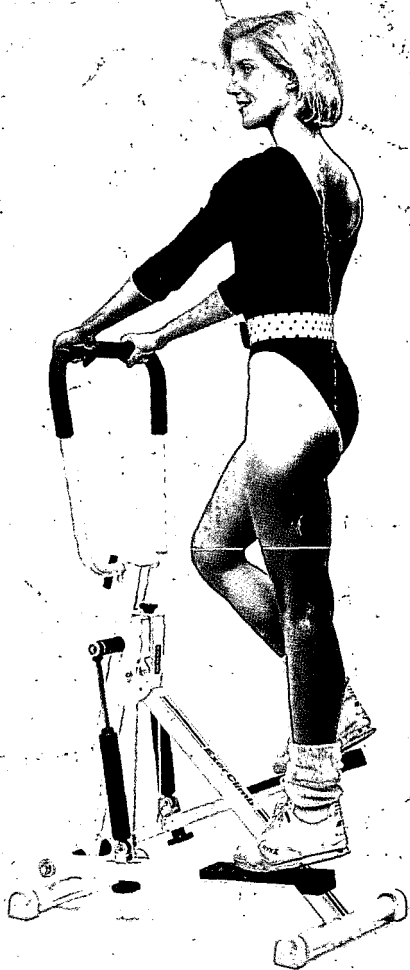
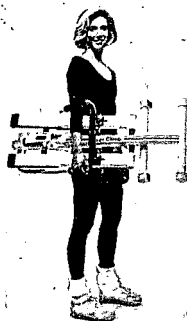
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